

Dangers of Unmet Expectations

Palm/Passion Sunday

Mark 11:1-11
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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March 29, 2026

Of all the many themes woven through the story we call Palm Sunday, I keep coming back—again and again—to expectations. Let's talk about expectations. We all have them. About almost everything. About almost everyone. And I'm not talking about the things we look forward to—the hopes that lift our spirits—but the standards, the assumptions, the quiet rules we carry about how people *should* be, how life *should* go, how we should measure up, how God *should* act.

It can be helpful, from time to time, to pause and take inventory. Parents have expectations of their children, and children—whether they are five or fifty—have expectations of their parents. We carry expectations into our marriages and partnerships, into friendships, into families both biological and chosen. Teachers have expectations of students, and students of teachers—and we know, don't we, that people often rise or fall to meet what is expected of them. We have expectations of employers and employees, of leaders and institutions. We have expectations of doctors when we are sick, of medications when we are hurting, of technology to keep us connected, informed, and entertained. And yes, we even carry expectations into this space. You have expectations of this church—of its programs, its ministries, its sense of community. You have expectations of me as your pastor. I have expectations of you. And I have expectations of myself—some of them healthy, some of them... less so.

And that raises an important question: What happens when expectations go unmet? Because they will. Psychologists tell us that many of our expectations are actually unconscious. We don't always know we're carrying them. But when they're not met—especially by people we love—they can quickly turn into frustration... disappointment... conflict... even resentment. **Unspoken expectations can become stumbling blocks in our relationships. We expect others to somehow just know what we need, what we hope for, what we assume—and when they don't, we feel let down.** Which is why reflection matters. Communication matters. Honesty matters.

And all of this brings us to the biblical story we hear today. Jesus enters Jerusalem. The crowd is electric. The energy is undeniable. Cloaks are thrown on the road. Branches wave in the air. And the people cry out: "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" It feels like a parade. A celebration. A moment of hope bursting into the streets. But beneath that joy and celebration is something deeper: Expectation. **The people gathered in Jerusalem were not just celebrating who Jesus was—they were projecting onto him who they needed him to be.**

The people had been waiting. Longing. Hoping. They were living under the weight of occupation, under the power of Rome, under systems that crushed their dignity and limited their freedom. And so they dreamed of a Messiah—a king like David—who would rise up, take power, and set them free. They expected strength. They expected victory. They expected revolution. And they believed Jesus was the one.

And to be fair, their expectations weren't unreasonable. They were shaped by generations of suffering. By promises passed down through scripture. By a deep and urgent hope that God would act decisively in history.

But here's the tension at the heart of this story: Jesus does not enter Jerusalem the way they expect. He comes not on a war horse, but on a donkey. Not with an army, but with humility. Not with violence, but with compassion. Not to overthrow, but to transform. And within a matter of days—just days—**the crowd's expectations collapse. Because Jesus does not become the kind of king they wanted. And so the same voices that shout "Hosanna!" will soon cry out, "Crucify him!"**

That is the danger of expectation when it goes unexamined. When we decide ahead of time who someone *should* be... When we limit what God *can* do... When we confuse our desires with divine purpose... **We can turn from praise to rejection in a heartbeat.** And if we're honest, we know that impulse lives in us too. We celebrate when life meets our expectations. We withdraw—or even lash out—when it doesn't.

Palm Sunday invites us to ask a difficult question: **Where in our lives are we still trying to make Jesus into who we expect him to be?** Do we want a Savior who fixes things quickly? Who takes away uncertainty? Who aligns neatly with our worldview, our politics, our preferences? Or are we willing to follow a Christ who refuses to meet those expectations? A Christ who redefines power as love. Who redefines victory as self-giving. Who redefines salvation not as domination, but as liberation for *all* people.

We say "yes" to the parts of Jesus we like—the comforting parts, the healing parts, the affirming parts—But what about the challenging parts? What about the call to love our enemies? To forgive again and again? To give more than feels reasonable? To seek justice, even when it costs us? What about the Jesus who refuses to fit neatly into our assumptions?

Palm Sunday invites us to wrestle with a difficult truth: Sometimes the problem is not that God has failed us. Sometimes the problem is that our expectations have been too small... too rigid... too shaped by fear, or power, or control. A wise voice once asked: **Do we want to follow God—wherever that leads? Or do we simply want God to meet our expectations?** Because those are not the same thing.

Expectation tries to put us in charge. Faith invites us to trust that we are not. Expectation says, "God, here is what I need you to do." Faith says, "God, I am open to what you are doing—even if it surprises me." Expectation demands. Faith listens. Expectation closes the story before it unfolds. Faith leaves room for transformation.

And so, as we enter this Holy Week—this sacred journey from celebration to suffering, from hope to heartbreak, from death to resurrection—I want to leave you with a few questions to carry with you:

- What expectations are you carrying right now—of others?
Of the people you love?
- What expectations are you carrying of yourself?
- What expectations are you placing on this community of faith?
- What expectations are you placing on Jesus?
- And perhaps most importantly:
- What expectations are you placing on God?

And what might it look like—not to abandon expectations entirely—but to hold them more gently... more honestly... more openly? Because it may be that **somewhere**

between “Hosanna” and “Crucify”... somewhere between what we hoped for and what actually is... God is still at work. Not always in the ways we expect. But always in ways that invite us deeper into love, deeper into grace, deeper into truth.

And it just may be that as this week unfolds, as we walk the road to the cross, we will discover that the transformation we long for does not begin with God meeting our expectations—but with God reshaping them. Because **the story doesn't end with unmet expectations**. It moves through betrayal. Through suffering. Through the cross. And somehow, on the other side, it opens into something no one expected at all – Easter and its empty tomb.

Amen.