

“LOOKING BEYOND OUR EXPECTATIONS”

Psalm 118; Luke 19:28-40

Palm Sunday, April 1, 2007

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We have once again arrived on Palm Sunday; this is the day when we mark the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. It is a day of pageantry and hope, filled with images of cloaks of many shapes, sizes, and colors being thrown down to the ground only to be ground under foot as the procession of Jesus and his followers continues into the beloved city of Jerusalem. This is the day when we remember that as Jesus entered the holy city of Jerusalem—even amid the pomp and circumstance—something was about to go terribly wrong. It is the day when the arrival of Jesus gave the streets of Jerusalem a mosh-pit like flavor, throwing disciples and curious gawkers, merchants and children, believers and doubters, together in a crush of people—all who had come to exalt a king who arrived not on a royal steed, but upon an untrained donkey or colt. Palm Sunday is a day of contradictions. This is a day when, perhaps for the first time, Jesus was recognized fully for bringing the liberating love of God into the world. But even as he is lauded in the streets of Jerusalem, the overtones of what is yet to come overwhelm the story and make it virtually impossible for this day to stand alone.

The contradictions of this day are everywhere, even in how the story is written. The gospel accounts vary greatly concerning what actually happens. Some texts announce that Jesus rides a colt, some that he enters upon a donkey with a colt en tow. Three of the four gospels announce that Jesus arrives amid waving branches and shouts of “Hosanna!” But in Luke’s gospel, the one we read for today, the branches and Hosannas are missing; instead, Luke treats us to a somewhat subdued procession of disciples and inner-circle friends celebrating the arrival of Jesus into Jerusalem. Luke’s gospel is disturbingly spare in its depiction of the events, and as I read all the accounts of Jesus’ arrival into Jerusalem this week the thing that struck me was the sense of expectation that fills the story, from whatever account we read it. No matter the writer, there is a tone of expectation: for Jesus, for those who gathered, and for us so many years later. We can read the accounts of Jesus’ teachings that lead up to the procession into Jerusalem and we can read what comes next: from Jesus weeping over Jerusalem to his eventual arrest and execution. All of that is imbedded in the text, but the expectation I think most interesting concerns what we expect to find here. That is, who and what are we expecting as we arrive on Palm Sunday in the year 2007? Certainly there is much to wonder about if we compare and contrast the gospel renditions of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem; but I fear that if we spend too much time contrasting Luke and John, Mark and Matthew, we will forever get stuck in an exercise of textual analysis and completely miss out on the real story that emerges when we engage not just the writers of the gospel but the subject of the gospel himself.

Expectations are powerful things. On one hand, expectations can be a building block and an important source of momentum, but they can also be the death knell of a product, movie, team, or idea when reality is in some way different from what has rightly or wrongly become the expectation. In contemporary times, movies are advertised months before they play for the first time on screen. We discover how well the movie met expectations by looking at the opening weekend grosses; thus, a movie is either the next *Titanic* or the next *Ishtar*, based solely on 48 hours worth of business. New

and improved products are sold to us millions of times in print and via the television in an effort to convince us as buyers that we need the improved version of a particular product. Sometimes building expectations can be good for a product; think of Apple's legendary "1984" Super bowl commercial. But at other times the expectations simply cannot be matched: think of the marketing disaster that was "New Coke."

We all know the value of a stock jumps or plummets not based solely on actual results, but based on a complex comparison of expected results versus quarterly reality. Thus, fortunes are made and lost, all based on how well expectations were met. Finally, in the spring, baseball fans—whether they be Mariner, Cardinal, and even Cub fans—are all filled with enthusiasm and hope based on optimistic pronouncements from spring training, even as we know that come October only one team will have managed to meet expectations. We buy tickets and we invest in hope, all based on the optimistic expectations of a few spring training games. Expectations are a powerful and seemingly omni-present reality, and I believe that the power of expectation is likewise an ever-present reality for us as we arrive on Palm Sunday. This is a day of expectation: when we expect Jesus to arrive in Jerusalem amid pomp and circumstance and when we expect to begin to draw lines around the pieces of the story we will accept, those we find a bit dubious, and those we will repeat and call our own. Palm Sunday is a day of expectation because from here the drama of the life and death of Jesus unfolds quickly and without regard to our ability to drink it all in. Before we know it, this story will begin to spin out of control until we sit in the darkness and quiet brought on by the crucifixion of Jesus. We will sit, pray, reflect, and hope that Easter will soon come and allow us to celebrate anew the one who came in the name of the Lord, the one who would be announced by stones, if not by throngs of people.

And so we enter into the drama, complete with our palm branches, so that we can take our place along the parade route, ready to shout our "hosannas" to Jesus. But as we lined up today, as we waved our palm branches I wondered what we are expecting from the one who enters the scene upon a donkey? This is a day when, as individuals, we are asked: "Who do we say that Jesus is? Who is it that we announce as we wave our palm branches? And what do we expect Jesus to provide for us?"

The text makes clear that the Pharisees were expecting someone who would keep the law. They were looking for a priest who would keep things traditional and orderly, keep the Sabbath, speak to the right people, and heal only at the proper time.

I can only imagine that the disciples were looking for something too: for Jesus to live a long life, for Jesus to bring victory so that their decision to follow him might be justified amid celebrity and power. They left their families and their jobs to follow him; they were expecting this journey to last a long time.

I imagine there were zealots among the crowd who wanted Jesus to take up the sword and use it to carve out a new law and a new way, if only he would bury that "prince of peace" guy along the road to carnage and power.

There were merchants who undoubtedly wondered if the throng of people would enter their store to purchase whatever was being sold; there were children who were energized by the movement and

curious about the one they called Jesus. There were lost souls looking for anything to call their own, there were soldiers who wanted something new to believe in because the endless warring had taken a toll on their lives, if not their bodies. The community, all of it, was gathered there that day, and each one of them needed something different from Jesus as he rode by them.

And so it is with us also, each one of us needing something different from Jesus. Jesus has been commodified and packaged, within our society and, unfortunately, within our faith too. Even as I decry the ways Jesus has been co-opted by political action committees of every variety and party, by the advertising agency-induced consumerism that makes a mockery of religious holidays, and by those who use Jesus to shill products as diverse as diet shakes and funeral plots, I recognize that I, too, package Jesus in a box based upon what I can muster up the courage to say about him as I walk the tight-rope between faithful believer and doubting skeptic, between one who tries valiantly to proclaim and live the social gospel and one who tells the story of the divine child who grew to teach, heal, and minister. On this Palm Sunday we gather on the cusp of the week I believe drives many of us into theological fits, because for as much as we love and desire to follow Jesus the radical teacher and healer, we are not quite sure we can find our way to follow Jesus the Risen Christ. Palm Sunday is the day when we can no longer deny our questions about how Jesus can be both human and divine, how he can be both a teacher of liberation and a literal healer of hearts and minds. Merely by showing up today, we announce we have expectations about who Jesus was and, more importantly, who Jesus continues to be. As I mentioned earlier, the crowd of people who gathered to welcome Jesus into Jerusalem had distinct expectations about who they were celebrating that day. The question for us is who are we celebrating?

Are we celebrating the “Mr. Rogers Jesus” who tells us in calm tones that every thing will be okay, that the demons of our lives cannot hurt us, that the gospel will bring us comfort and calm?

Are we celebrating the “Boat-rocker Jesus” who comes always ready to stir up the people and make sure they are disquieted and on unsound ground?

Are we celebrating the “prozac, chocolate brownie, sit-on-the-couch Jesus” who makes us happy, relaxed and secure; the one who takes away all our pain; the one whom we absorb but never really know?

Perhaps we are looking for the plastic Jesus, the one who is indestructible, who sits there always waiting for us to find him. This Jesus is the toy that has moveable arms and legs, the one we can leave lying around and “play with” when we feel the need.

Or, perhaps, are we celebrating Jesus the Savior who comes not to serve as some one-dimensional caricature of faith but as a healer, as a peaceful presence, as a liberator, as a “Prince of Peace,” among those who would seek a ruler of nations instead of a ruler of hearts? Too often we spend our time deciding which parts of Jesus we are willing to accept: the teacher, the healer, the boat-rocker, the pill, the human one, the divine one. And before we know it, we have de-constructed Jesus to such a degree that there is nothing left to hold on to. Palm Sunday is a day when we can stop parsing out Jesus into

easy-to-digest little bits of theology and, instead, encounter him with palm branches in hand, with complete and utter enthusiasm and devotion. Not just part of Jesus entered into Jerusalem riding on a donkey; the whole package arrived that day. In our Palm Sunday encounter with Jesus it is time for us to start looking beyond our expectations, beyond that which is easy for us to accept, and instead greet the one who comes in the name of the Lord. It is time to stop confining Jesus to our expectations and let our unencumbered Hosannas ring out loud. Come. lay your disbelief, your discomfort, and your fears by the side of the road and join in the parade. Jesus, the Prince of Peace is here. What else were you expecting? Thanks be to God. Amen.