

“Expectation and Denial”
Isaiah 50:4-9; Matthew 21:1-11;
Matthew 26:14-15, 47-56

Palm Sunday, April 5, 2020
Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

Palm Sunday is always one of those Sundays when we want to come with shouts of celebration. I love the waving of the palms and the idea that we can process and remember this moment of celebration when Jesus comes into Jerusalem. The struggle is that in our time right now, it is a little hard to want to have shouts of celebration. I feel I am so hunkered down, trying to stay away from that which might accelerate this virus that is out there so that I might not be part of its spread. I struggle to come up with anything close to shouts of celebration.

We have these ups and downs in our lives. We have a friend go to the hospital, then find out that he can be treated and be able to come home. There are points of desolation and consolation even amid all this struggle. As I look at Jesus coming into Jerusalem, I am reminded that he is in a very melancholy mood, hearing the accolades and perhaps recognizing how appropriate they are, yet at the same time realizing the people don't really realize, they really don't understand, what is happening. I suspect he knows that they want him to come in and be like that knight on a white horse, to be the calvary coming to save the day.

While he is bringing the saving grace of God into our lives, he's not coming to simply change the whole social structure of the time. He's not coming to wipe the slate clean in a single flash of lightning. He's coming to invite us into the very grace of God, into the way God comes and shows his love for us. He's going to enter into our experience and show us what it means to love, to care, to be present.

I don't fault the crowd for wanting him to be the one who throws the Romans out and makes everything right. I think that's one of those desires that we, as human beings, often have. We want to find someone who can just solve the problems that we're having for us, who can lead us in a way that all those problems would just disappear. It doesn't seem like that's what God is going to do. At least not in this coming of Jesus.

It makes me think about how I can create expectations, and I wonder how often those expectations are overblown, unrealistic, because I don't quite have a handle on what really needs to happen.

So as Jesus comes in, we hear that the whole city is in a turmoil because of his coming in. It seems like they are confused. Who is this man? Some know and some don't believe it. It feels like the two ways that I want to deal with my problems are that I want to find a way for something external to solve them, some person to solve them for me, or I simply want to deny that there is a problem. I try to go on with my life without believing that there's anything there that I need to pay attention to.

It's hard to face up to the real problems of my life. It's hard right now for me to see the reality of this virus. It's hard for me to see how much it's changed the way we do life right now, and I wonder how it will affect us over the long term. Will we be able to just go back to the lives we were living? What effects will it have? Can I really expect for someone to simply come in and solve the whole issue? We may get a vaccine at some point and maybe that will mitigate it and begin to ratchet it down. Perhaps our physical distancing will keep it from being so rampant. But it's hard to see. It's hard to conceptualize what's really happening. I look at a map of the world and it's just everywhere. So how do we deal with this problem and how does it relate to Jesus coming in on this Palm Sunday?

The interesting thing is that Jesus seemed to have a sense of what he was entering into. Later in the week we will read about his time in the garden, when he recognizes how hard it's going to be, even asking God, "Does it really have to go this way?" I think that passage from Isaiah where it said he set his face like flint is the idea that he was going to confront the reality that was before him. In some way, we, too, have to accept and confront this reality that is before us. We can't expect someone to simply come and wipe it away, and we can't simply deny it. Instead, I think we can look to Jesus and listen to Jesus as he invites us to recognize what he would do.

You see, as he's coming into Jerusalem, he is coming to invite us, through his model for us, how to live our lives. He is coming to give his life, to give of

himself, to care for the very people that weren't certain of him. He was coming to give himself for those who had unrealistic expectations or were denying that there was a problem that needed to be solved. He is coming into their midst to give and bring the love of God in the midst of all of their problems and all of the issues they were facing. The struggles. The occupation. The uncertainties. Instead of just saying these problems weren't there, he comes into their midst to remind his people to come and be in touch with God.

In John's Gospel, Jesus goes in and clears the temple. He comes to clean up the relationship we have with God and show us how to enter into being with each other in the pain, walking with each other through struggles, caring for each other. Giving of ourselves is truly the way of God. We see as Jesus comes, entering into the city, he comes to give himself.

So, if Jesus were coming today, what would he do? Would he come to sweep away the virus? Would he meet our expectations? Or can we hear the invitation he gives in a different way? One of caring for the suffering and the losses, caring even for our enemies. As he invites us, I wonder, how do we do this? Can we turn to him? How do we do this? Can we open ourselves to God's spirit? How do we do this? Entering into passion week, into holy week, is a time when we can ask, "How do we do this?"

His disciples desert him. Peter will deny him. And yet, he invites us to come. How do we do this? We do it by keeping our eyes on Jesus, by following, opening, waiting, listening, caring, and continuing to ask that question: how do we do this? Amen.