
on Holy Week
Chapel in the Park United Church
March 24, 2024
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Matthew 21:1-11 and Mark 11:1-11

Palm Sunday. Well, we are certainly into the final stretch of Lent now. Easter is just one week away. It's time to hard-boil some eggs and think about baking some hot cross buns. If you are one of those people who have been giving something up during Lent, your days of deprivation are almost at an end. Only one more week. You can do it. There is some comfort today that Lent is almost over. Plus, since this is Palm Sunday, we have sung songs of praise and waved palm branches - at least in spirit - right here. Life is good. It's time to celebrate. It's time to enjoy ourselves.

And yet, Palm Sunday isn't necessarily just about happy things, because we know that the coming week is Holy Week, which is a time of sadness too. A time of betrayal and death. A time of separation from Jesus as he walks with a cross without his friends. It is a time of denial and fear. It is a time of grief.

In some churches, Palm Sunday services begin with joy and cheering. And then part-way through the service, colourful elements like banners are removed and replaced with black ones. Sometimes, black or purple fabric is placed over the cross or the communion table. The mood of the whole service becomes dark and depressing. And at the end of the service, the people leave the sanctuary, heads down, in silence. In those churches, Palm Sunday and Good Friday are conflated into a single service, usually called "Palm/Passion Sunday". But our tradition is to maintain Palm Sunday as a service of joyful celebration. And to invite you to other events during Holy Week including - this year - Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Because those are special events of the own with their own meaning.

Nothing is perfect of course. If you are participating in worship today and won't be back with us until next Sunday then you will move from this joyful service at Palm Sunday to another joyful service at Easter. And you miss miss out on the dramatic elements that are intrinsic to Holy Week. And for those churches that conflate Palm

Sunday with Good Friday, they catch the whole “death of Jesus” part pretty well. But in my mind they miss out on the difficult elements of Holy Week that deal with confusion, denial, betrayal, and unmet expectations.

Unmet expectations you ask? Who has unmet expectations? Well, lots of people. Even during Holy Week. Perhaps particularly during Holy Week.

But before we get to expectations. On the surface, the Palm Sunday story is one of the weirdest stories in the Bible. I mean, why a parade? Whose benefit was that for? Who was supposed to be watching the parade anyway? Let me offer some history.

The Jewish people living in Palestine at the time of Jesus were politically and economically dominated by Rome. When the story of Jesus riding on a donkey allegedly happened, passover was approaching. And that meant that many Jewish pilgrims were in Jerusalem. And passover for Jewish people represents a story of liberation from slavery and domination. Passover in Palestine would be a reminder of liberation in a place where Jewish people perhaps did not feel very liberated. Tensions would therefore naturally be high. In order to keep the peace, Pilate would have brought in troops to help control the crowds. To make sure that the passover festivities did not become a catalyst for civic unrest and rebellion.

And so during the event that we commemorate on Palm Sunday, we would have actually had two parades. Through one gate, we had Pilate, riding on a war horse, leading a large, well-equipped and well-trained army. That parade represented power, force, control, fear, and domination. Through the other gate, we had - Jesus. Riding on a donkey, with no army, no wealth, nothing of power. Pilate would have been greeted with a mixture of indifference and fear. In contrast, Jesus was greeted with joyful crowds, grateful crowds, loud crowds, singing crowds.

In the biblical stories, we only hear about the parade that Jesus led. But modern biblical scholars pretty much all agree that Pilate would have had his own parade around the same time.

The classic way to put on a show of military strength is to put on a show - a parade. That annual event would have been very distasteful to the Jewish people in Palestine. And they all knew about it, so they didn't bother to write it down. The Jesus

parade was in fact a parade in response to Pilate's parade. Jesus's parade was actually a parody. Perhaps even a lampoon of Pilate's parade. Jesus's parade was criticism. It was ridicule. It was sarcasm. It was the sort of mocking response to authority that can get you killed!

The parade of Jesus was political. It was sarcasm. It was disobedience.

It was passover, and many Jewish people living a long way from Palestine would have been in Jerusalem at that time. There would have been a large number of Jewish people who heard Jesus speak for the first time. And who came to hear Jesus because they had heard that Jesus was - or at least possibly was - the messiah. They came with expectations.

Remember also that to Jewish people, “salvation” was not personal, it was corporate, and it was political. The salvation that the messiah was supposed to bring was liberation from the power of Rome. Now, what do you think you would feel if you expected Jesus to be that kind of messiah. And yet when you went to hear him, Jesus just spoke of the kingdom of God and of loving your enemies. He spoke of turning the other cheek. How would you feel? Do you think you would be upset? Do you think your own expectations of Jesus would be unmet? Do you think you would have been angry? Do you think you might have said, “he’s not the messiah”. Do you think that your own songs of praise could have easily turned have turned into shouts of “crucify him”?

The people expected Jesus to come in military force to overthrow the Roman Empire. But Jesus came in love to preach inner peace. I think the problem then - as today - is that Jesus was radically different than what people expected. People wanted Jesus to come in force. But Jesus's vision of the kingdom of God was more radical than that. In the words of Julia Seymour, “By riding a colt with no previous rider, Jesus is revealing, perhaps too subtly, that what he brings is very different from what previous rulers have offered. Yet the crowds miss that. Most of the disciples don't understand it. They're too busy calling for salvation, and they know exactly what they want that to look like. This is one of the challenges of Holy Week - letting go of what we want salvation to be and allowing ourselves to be open to what it is.”

If you think I’m exaggerating, I present for evidence our readings from today. I

hope you noticed that our readings today included two versions of the same story - the story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem - the original event on which “Palm Sunday” is based. Did you notice similarities between the two versions of the story? Did you notice the one huge difference?

In Mark - which was the first gospel to be written down - Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a colt. In Matthew - which was written perhaps 15 years later, Jesus rides into Jerusalem - circus style - on a donkey and a colt together. To quote Matthew, “The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them”. What exactly is going on here? This is one story where I wish I was fluent in biblical Greek because I want to get past the English translation. There must be a very funny story behind this strange translation. But scholars assure us that there is no translation problem. For example - when it says that “Jesus rode on them”, “them” does in fact refer to two animals. I heard a preacher once declare that “them” referred to the blankets. But no. We do not have a translation problem.

What do you think of this story? Are you - like me - fixated on wondering how exactly Jesus rode on two animals simultaneously?” And if he did, why did Mark not include that juicy detail? Well, I’m sorry to disappoint you. But Jesus did not ride on two animals simultaneously. A better question is: “Given that Jesus clearly rode only one animal, why did Matthew choose to write the story in a way that stated that Jesus rode on two animals simultaneously.”

Matthew - throughout the gospel - is always trying to make links between Jesus’s life and ministry and passages in the Old Testament. Matthew references two animals in our reading today because he is pointing to Zechariah 9:9,

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” Wait - I hear you say - that doesn’t sound like two animals in Zechariah. It’s not clear, really. But that was the wrong translation for Matthew anyway. Matthew - and Jesus for that matter - would have been using the Septuagint, which is a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. Matthew would have heard those words in

Aramaic, translated from Greek, translated from Hebrew. In the Septuagint Zechariah 9:9 reads,

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Sion: proclaim it aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem; behold, the King is coming to thee, just, and a Saviour, he is meek and riding on an ass, and a young foal.”

So Matthew gives us two animals in his gospel because there are two animals in his translation of Zechariah. And Matthew makes that link to reinforce - in his own mind at least - that Jesus is the Jewish messiah.

Which is a very long-winded way of saying that we have two animals in Matthew's story because of the expectations that Matthew had about Jesus. Maybe Jesus did not actually save the Jewish people from the Romans. But at least he fulfilled the image found in Zechariah! In this story, Matthew did not write about the Jesus he knew, he wrote about the Jesus that he expected. Our expectations of Jesus matter. See - we did make it back to discussing expectations after all!

Today it is still very easy for us to have unmet expectations about the nature of Jesus, salvation, and the nature of God's gifts to us. What we want may or may not line up with what God provides. But when our expectations are not met, does that mean that God isn't doing the right thing, or that we must be more patient? Or, are unmet expectations an invitation for us to explore our own expectations and to grow through that?

That is why Palm Sunday is such a great Sunday. It's not about being on the cheering team. It's not about watching other people betray Jesus while we sit smugly on the sidelines feeling superior. It's about realizing that Jesus doesn't quite meet our expectations either. Palm Sunday is an invitation to reassess our own expectations.

I'm reminded of an old joke, one version of which goes like this: A farmer is in Iowa during a flood. The river is overflowing. Water is surrounding the farmer's home up to his front porch. As he is standing there, a boat comes up. The man in the boat says, “Jump in, and I'll take you to safety.” The farmer crosses his arms and says stubbornly, “Oh no thanks, I put my trust in God.” The boat goes away. The water rises to the second story. Another boat comes up. The man says to the farmer, “Hurry, jump in. I'll save

you.” The farmer again says, “Oh no thanks, I put my trust in God.” The boat goes away. Now the water is inching over the roof. As the farmer stands on the roof, a helicopter comes over, and drops a ladder. The pilot yells down to the farmer, “I’ll save you. Climb the ladder.” The farmer yells back, “Oh no thanks, I put my trust in God.” The helicopter goes away. The water continues to rise and sweeps the farmer off the roof into the swiftly moving water. He drowns. The farmer goes to heaven. God sees him and says, “What are you doing here?” The farmer says, “I put my trust in you, and you let me down.” God says, “What do you mean, I let you down? I sent you two boats and a helicopter!”.

When we want help, it’s amazing how often we only recognize that help when it comes in ways that we expect. In ways that fit our current thinking. In ways that we want that help to come. And that does work much of the time. But what happens then when the help we need is in fact to change our own thinking? Often, we do not recognize that help at all.

The blogger who writes under the name, “the outpatient monk” has this to say about Jesus's followers. “The only people who came close to following Jesus are the people who had dropped their previous nets, had left their lives behind and were willing to follow, to learn. (and even some of them, like Judas and Peter, had their moments). These people knew Jesus. They had already had the time to be disappointed, that is, to change their expectations. They exchanged their lives for a life with misfits, poor people, children... and worse... each other. We still turn to Jesus to be our best friend, our President, our CEO, our boyfriend, our guru, our hipster youth pastor showing us how to be cool. We have a very set agenda for what Jesus needs to be doing in the next few years of our lives. We will be disappointed. So let us wave our branches, shout hosannah, and lay down our coats. But if we want to make it through the rest of the week faithful to Jesus, let's clear our calendars and pack our bags. We are going to end up somewhere very different than where we think we were headed.”

So - there we have it. Today is Palm Sunday, Holy Week beckons us. It beckons us to open our hearts and minds to see Jesus in ways we have never expected. It beckons us to open ourselves to salvation - not on the terms that we demand - but on the terms that God provides. Holy Week beckons us to pack our bags and head out on a journey where

we don't know where we will end up.

But the journey will end, and we will end up somewhere. Perhaps we will, in fact, end up just where we need to be. And if we all journey together ... that may be all that we really need anyway. Thanks be to God.

Now - let's get packing!

Amen.