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 “Everlasting: Expectations” |
|  Rev. Jennie Sankey Mark 11:1-11 |

March 28, 2021

Today is Palm Sunday-and since you’re watching online, you won’t get to do our planned parade around the parking lot-but I hope you are either waved a palm or found a branch from your own yard to wave as we sang our first hymn. We are officially in Holy Week now-when we remember the last events of Jesus’ life. And today, we remember a big parade.

I love being a spectator at a good parade. Whatever the occasion; the Duluth Fall Festival, Mardi Gras, College Homecoming…there are certain things that happen at a parade that make it good. I believe those things include: at least two good marching bands, candy being thrown out to the crowd, some well decorated floats, some firetruck sirens blasting, and something big at the end, like Santa at the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade.

When I started high school marching band, I thought being in my first parade would be almost as fun as watching a parade-now I was part of the entertainment! I imagined looking sharp, pumping the crowd up, and still getting some of that candy, surely they save some of that for the parade participants. Plus, I was on the drumline-and they’re the best part of the marching band. We showed up 2 hours before the parade even started on a cold February morning so we could get in the line-up. By the time the parade started my feet and back were already tired from lugging my bass drum around. When the parade finally began, my excitement rose again. I paid attention, staying in step, holding our lines, and keeping the beat with our drum cadences. What was special about this parade is that there were no vehicles allowed, only people on foot and…oh did I mention, this was the Fort Worth, TX Stock Show and Rodeo parade? Only people on foot and livestock. Lots and lots of livestock leaving behind mounds of steaming poop that we marched right through all the way to the end of the parade route. At the end of the parade, you know what the bands gets? Not candy. They get…back on the bus.

I wasn’t all wrong, we did pump up the crowd, and we looked relatively sharp when we weren’t dodging the land mines-but my expectations were a little misplaced about what the experience would really be like.

During the season of Lent, we’ve been walking through stories of God’s covenants, God’s big promises, with God’s people. God has made some big promises: to never again flood the earth. To make Abraham and Sarah’s descendants as numerous as the stars. To get God’s people to the promised land. To love and not condemn the world. To write God’s law on our hearts, and forgive us, never looking back. God’s people received these covenants. And over and over again, we, God’s people develop some big expectations around them. Based on these promises, God’s people expected a savior, a Messiah, a King who would come deliver them, God’s chosen people. They expected some might military action that would overthrow the powerful Roman empire that oppressed them and put them on top. They expected freedom as God accomplished God’s Big Promises.

In our story today, the crowd is joining Jesus in journeying to Jerusalem for the Passover. Around 200,000 faithful pilgrims would travel to the city for this feast, which centers around a story that harkens back to one of those big covenant promises God made-to bring the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt into freedom. The Jews who were preparing to celebrate the feast in a city occupied and ruled by Rome would not have missed the irony of celebrating freedom from oppression while they were still being ruled by Rome. But this is not the only parade happening. While thousands of Jews pour into Jerusalem for Passover, waving palms, Pontius Pilate, the one who will later order Jesus’ crucifixion, is riding in his own parade on the other side of the city in his regular imperial demonstration of power that just so happens to coincide with major Jewish festivals. With a parade of calvary and soldiers, Rome reminds the people of Jerusalem who is really in charge.

Jesus, and everyone walking with him would have known of this other parade, which is why Jesus has so carefully planned his own entrance. The Gospel of Mark takes pains for the reader to notice these details, in a short and to the point book that doesn’t waste many words. He instructs the disciples on where to find the donkey, asking them to publicly announce what they will be using it for. So it’s no wonder that the expectations of the crowd grows, as they witness this challenge to the powers that be. They lay cloaks before him, a gesture attributed to royalty. They welcome him as a king. The crowd shouts, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!” These are shouts of defiance, protest, and hope for expectations to be fulfilled in a new kingdom rule.

But as much as the crowd expected and welcomed a king, Jesus was giving them a different set of context clues. A king preparing for battle would ride in on a big strong war horse. But Jesus chooses a donkey, using symbolism from Old Testament prophet Zechariah who prophesized that a king would come to Jerusalem, “humble, and riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” So yes, he comes as royalty, but as royalty who comes with something other than military might in mind. A king preparing to overthrow a city would surely have some words, some response to the crowd’s praises. But we hear nothing from Jesus in this story, except for his directions on where to get the colt, saying, “The Lord needs it.” A king would ride near the front of the procession, flanked by a royal guard, trailed by his soldiers. But, did you catch this in verse nine? “Then those who went ahead and those who followed behind were shouting…” Jesus rides in the middle of the pack, led and followed by chanting pilgrims coming to Jerusalem for the of Passover. And then when he finally arrives at the temple, he goes in, looks around…and then goes back home for the night! Rather anti-climactic for such a triumphant arrival. But Jesus does not come to meet this crowd’s expectations of domination, triumph and victory. He comes in humility, riding among and with the crowd as they enter Jerusalem shouting “Hosanna!”

In the PHPC Lenten small group I’ve been a part of this season, we spent some time with this word “humility” a couple weeks back. Jill Duffield, the author of our Lenten devotional book, “Lent in Plain Sight” offers the story of John the Baptist as an example of this virtue when he is questioned by the priests an Levites. They want to know who he is and what he says about himself, and he tells them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” She writes, “…clarity of purpose and an unwavering belief in God’s call paves the way for a life that inevitably points away from self and toward the divine, **a life that prepares a path for the present and coming Messiah**.” Our small group wondered how one goes about cultivating and practicing humility, a virtue that seems more complex than empathy or generosity. I wonder if humility has anything to do with our expectations.

When God’s people expect God’s promises to be fulfilled in a certain way, we live out our faith based on these expectations. If God will send a mighty king, than we are ready to conquer those who oppose us. If God will bring military victory, then we train as soldiers who will fight in the Lord’s army. But when God shows up on a donkey, when God shows up at the dinner table, when God shows up dying on a cross-we are exposed. Because when we expect a God who will deliver to us power, might, and worldly victories, we aren’t pointing to God at all-we are pointing towards ourselves. Our own desire for power, our need to win. The people gathered on that first Palm Sunday were preparing a way-but not for the Messiah they were expecting.

Now there is nothing wrong with having a little Palm Sunday parade, and joining in the “Hosannas!” of the enthusiastic crowd at Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. But if we are to live lives that prepare a path for the present and coming Messiah, we must turn our fingers away from ourselves and back towards Jesus. We must carefully choose which kind of parade we’ll be joining, and consider our expectations as we join in. What does it mean for us to join in a parade with Jesus riding into the world today?

Jesus is riding into a world trying to beat our way through COVID and return to normal. A world where mass shootings are commonplace. A world where we seek to elevate our nation’s wealth and success above all others.

We don’t know exactly how God is going to respond to these, but if it’s anything like Palm Sunday, it’s not going to be with military might. Jesus isn’t riding at the front as a commander of an army, or as Santa Claus at the end of the Thanksgiving Parade. God sends Jesus among us riding on a donkey paving a path of humility. He’s behind and among us as we pick up our branches and welcome him here today. We aren’t just spectators. We’re the marching band, carrying the tune, keeping the beat, and sludging through the horse droppings, playing a tune that points beyond ourselves.

The path of humility is not an easy one for us. For even when we see God riding among us, our expectations turn toward ourselves. This is not something we can easily change about ourselves. It takes practice, intention, and a willingness to recognize and set aside our expectations. With Holy Week ahead of us, intentional opportunities to work on this abound.

Starting today, you can find a modern take on the stations of the cross set-up around the PHPC campus, starting at our soon-to-be-planted raised bed gardens behind the kitchen, where you can let your feet guide you and short readings and reflections ground you. You might expect, “that’s just a Catholic thing!” As you put your feet to prayer, expect to travel far.

If you’re looking to dig deeper and reset your expectations about who Jesus was and what he was all about, the Explorations class is meeting daily, beginning tonight at 7:30 pm to read through and discuss Marcus Borg’s book, *The Last Week.* And guess what? You’ve already done the reading for tonight, which focuses on Mark 11:1-11, our text today. Details are in your Friday Chosen Word e-news. You might think, “I’ve heard the stories, I know Jesus.” As you read and share with others, expect to be challenged.

On Thursday, gather your family for dinner using the “Maundy Thursday At-Home” resource sent out on Friday or come join us here for a simple dinner and service centering around Jesus’ command to “love one another.” You might expect you won’t have time to make this happen. As you pause and eat, expect to be nourished.

On Friday, you can tune into a Good Friday service, and take some time to sit in the story of the death of Jesus and the grief of those who were close to him, and join in an all-church prayer vigil that will carry us to Christ’s resurrection. You might expect this to be too contemplative for your style. As you just sit with a story of traumatic injustice, and deep grief, expect to meet God there.

Come next Sunday, Easter, you think you know what to expect-loud brass, the same old story of the stone rolled back after we’ve been waiting, waiting, waiting for some good news to break in. Expect this old story to contain something new, for as good as it is to try and set our expectations, it’s even better to be surprised when a shout of “Alleluia!” rolls off our tongue. Amen.