

“What Are We Expecting?”

“Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

A highlight of my childhood summers was the annual Fourth of July Parade, one of the largest parades in New Jersey. My parents would wake me up early so that we could get a good viewing spot along Front Street to take in all that the parade offered every year: floats, marching bands, fire trucks, local politicians and celebrities, clowns, vendors selling souvenirs and cotton candy, and Shriners passing out flags for us to wave. It was a wonderful day of celebration that continued with afternoon picnics and the evening fireworks display that filled our neighborhood. There was a comforting reassurance that went along with the celebration of our country's independence, because we knew what to expect when Independence Day approached. There were seldom any major changes to the festivities, and that was one of the reasons the Fourth of July Parade was so popular; in the midst of the changes and turmoil of the 1960s, our hometown parades were events we could look forward to as moments of comfort and certainty.

The people of Jerusalem who gather on the side of the road leading into the city in today's Gospel lesson were well-acquainted with parade customs and knew what to expect when they heard that a parade was taking place. The history of Israel includes royal entrances and processions that welcomed prominent people as they triumphantly entered the city:

- “Then hurriedly they all took their cloaks and spread them for him on the bare steps; and they blew the trumpet, and proclaimed, ‘Jehu is king.’” – 2Kings 9:13.
- “On the twenty-third day of the second month, in the one hundred and seventy-first year, the Jews entered it with praise and palm branches, and with harps and cymbals and stringed instruments, and with hymns and songs, because a great enemy had been crushed and removed from Israel.” – 1 Maccabees 13:51.
- “Therefore, carrying ivy-wreathed wands and beautiful branches and also fronds of palm, they offered hymns of thanksgiving to him who had given success to the purifying of his own holy place.” – 2 Maccabees 10:7.

The inhabitants of Jerusalem also knew what to expect from parades that they were forced to watch, parades conducted by the conquering Romans as a display of imperial might and a warning not to even think of rebellion:

- “Imagine the imperial procession's arrival in the city. A visual panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust. The eyes of the silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful.” – Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week*.

Filled with expectations from their own history and their experiences with the Romans, the people of Jerusalem gathered at the entrance to the city to welcome a man from Nazareth about whom much had been spoken. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is so important to the Gospel story that it is recorded in all four

Gospels (although only John mentions palms; Matthew refers to “*branches from the trees*” that the people spread on the road before him). In Matthew’s account, Jesus’ triumphal entry into the Holy City fulfills the prophecy of Zechariah, with the Mount of Olives being the scene of the fulfillment of God’s promises through the prophet:

- “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. He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the warhorse from Jerusalem; and the battle-bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth ... On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives, which lies before Jerusalem on the east” – Zechariah 9:9-10, 14:4.

Jesus uses Bethphage as a staging area for his entry into Jerusalem, instructing his disciples to procure a donkey and colt upon which he will ride into the city. Displaying the obedience that is a hallmark of discipleship, “*the disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them.*” (21:6-7). As Jesus enters the city, the crowds that he had previously sent away (“*After sending away the crowds, he got into the boat and went to the region of Magadan.*” – 15:39) now reappear as supporters and potential disciples. They pave Jesus’ way into the city by spreading “*their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.*” (21:8). In their shouts of acclamation, the crowds use the words from Psalm 118:25-26, the last of the Hallel psalms sung at Passover:

- “Save us, we beseech you, O LORD! O LORD, we beseech you, give us success! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD. We bless you from the house of the LORD.”

“Hosanna” was originally a prayer in which the people cried out to God “save, I/we beseech you.” By the first century it had become a contentless, festive shout, something like a religious “hurrah” with no more literal meaning than “goodbye.” “The one who comes” had developed messianic overtones, applied here to Jesus as a royal acclamation (heard in John the Baptist’s question: “*Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*” – 11:3). The crowds who had experience with the parades of their own conquering kings as well as the parades of the Empire that had conquered them welcomed Jesus with the expectation that he would be the one who would triumph on their behalf, the fulfillment of the prophecy of a mighty warrior-king who would bring victory to God’s people:

- “Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of fearful heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.’ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy ... And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.” – Isaiah 35:3-6, 10.

When the parade has passed and Jesus has entered Jerusalem, Matthew reports that “*the whole city was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’*” (21:10), a question which is analogous with Jesus’ own question earlier in the Gospel:

- “Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’” – 16:13-15.

The crowds respond that “*this is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee*” (21:11), identifying him as the fulfillment of the promise of a “prophet like Moses” in Deuteronomy: “*I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command.*” (Deuteronomy 18:18). They announce that Jesus is the fulfillment of their expectations of the prophet of God, the conquering Messiah who will defeat the enemies of God’s people and restore Israel to its rightful place as a strong and independent kingdom among the nations.

But the expectations that the crowds brought with them to that parade are quickly dashed when they discover that Jesus is not the one they had expected. While he does make a display of righteous power when he overturns the tables of the money changers in the Temple, declaring that “*my house shall be called a house of prayer; but you are making it a den of robbers*” (21:13), over the next few days he fails to raise up an army or challenge the authority of the Romans. Instead, he shares a series of parables, has several contentious encounters with the Sadducees and Pharisees, laments over the fate of Jerusalem and speaks of signs of the end of the age, and informs his disciples that “*after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.*” (26:2). After sharing the Passover Seder meal with his disciples, at which he institutes the Lord’s Supper with the words “*take, eat; this is my body ... Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins*” (26:26-28), Jesus is betrayed by one of his disciples, arrested by the Romans, tried and condemned to death by Pontius Pilate, mocked and tortured by the Roman soldiers, and crucified at Golgotha (“place of a skull”). The same crowds who had welcomed him into the city with the expectation that he would be their conquering hero now cry out for his crucifixion and come to Golgotha to taunt him: “*Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, ‘You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.’*” (27:39-40). Their disappointment had turned to anger, for a Messiah who would come into the city only to die on a Cross was not what they were expected when they cried out “Hosanna!”

Jesus did not meet the expectations of the crowds that greeted him on that first Palm Sunday – nor was it ever his intention to fulfill them. Jesus is, in the words of Simon Peter, “*the Messiah, the Son of the living God*” (16:16), the one who comes to fulfill God’s Will and to accomplish what God desires for God’s people, which is salvation not only from human enemies but from forces that seek to separate us from God’s loving presence for all time: “*Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.*” (10:28). Jesus is the Messiah who may not meet the expectations of the people of that time, but he is the Messiah who will exceed the expectations of people of all times because he comes to accomplish God’s Will, who even in his hour of agony at Gethsemane prays “*My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.*” (26:42). Jesus knows that his purpose in entering the Holy City is not to fulfill the people’s desires and expectations but to accomplish the purpose of the one who sent him, the Lord who proclaimed through the prophet Isaiah that “*my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*” (Isaiah 55:8-9).

- “As Jesus, whose kingship is marked by a cross rather than a throne, enters Jerusalem to those shouts of acclamation from those who will later reject him, the deep irony in this opening scene in Jerusalem sets the tone for the passion story as a whole.” – M. Eugene Boring.

A few days ago, a Purolator truck pulled up in front of our house and dropped off a long box that contained the palms we had planned to distribute in worship on Palm Sunday before the COVID-19 pandemic made it impossible for us to gather together. As I brought the palms to the church building and put them in the kitchen refrigerator in hopes that they will remain fresh until we can come back together again, I thought about our own expectations for this day that are rooted in our experiences of Palm Sundays in the past. This has always been a joyful day, when we wave our palms in the air as we sing *“all glory, laud, and honor to you, redeemer, king, to whom the lips of children made sweet hosannas sing.”* (ELW Hymn 344). Many congregations have festive processions through the streets of their community, inviting others to share in this day of celebration. We bless the palms and those who bear them, praying that God will *“grant us grace to follow our Lord in the way of the cross, so that, joined to his death and resurrection, we enter into life with you”* (Palm Sunday Liturgy). But the festive nature of this day also includes somber overtones of what is to come during this Holy Week, when we will also follow our Lord in the path that will lead him to *“ride on, ride on in majesty! In lowly pomp ride on to die, bow your meek head to mortal pain, then take, O Christ, your power and reign!”* (ELW Hymn 346). The palms that we wave on this day have a true meaning that may surpass our expectations for Palm Sunday.

- “They are not signs of triumph, moral merit badges – they are not that. They are not signs even of tragedy, a highly developed force of dramatic but unreal enterprise. They are not signs of triumph or of tragedy, they are signs of suffering, the suffering of the Savior, the suffering of his people, the suffering of all creation and of us with it. The palms remind us of what the psychologists have just learned: that victory is just the other side of defeat and failure is just the other side of success.” – Peter Gomes.

This Palm Sunday is the beginning of a Holy Week that is unlike any other in our lifetimes, one in which we cannot gather together to walk with our Lord in the way of the Cross, gathering at the Lord’s Table on Maundy Thursday, hearing the story of his passion and death on Good Friday, and celebrating his resurrection on Easter Sunday. We have no experiences that can prepare us for observing Holy Week apart; but this is also an opportunity for us to put aside all of the assumptions and expectations that are rooted in our past experiences of this time so that we might see and hear anew what is at the heart of Holy Week, how God’s Will has been accomplished through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

- “The cross is not and cannot be loved. Yet only a crucified Christ can bring the freedom which changes the world because it is no longer afraid of death. In his time the crucified Christ was regarded as a scandal and as foolishness. Today, too, it is considered old-fashioned to put him in the centre of Christian faith and of theology. Yet only when men are reminded of him, however untimely this may be, can they be set free from the power of the facts of the present time, and from the laws and compulsions of history, and be offered a future which will never grow dark again.” – Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*.

Knowing what to expect at the parades of my childhood was a source of comfort in the midst of change and uncertainty. As we enter into this Holy Week in the most uncertain and fear-filled time of our lives, our Lord comes to us with a word that exceeds our expectations with the *“peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* (Philippians 4:7). At a time in which we do not know what to expect, we know that God is with us and will give us the fullness of that blessed presence and steadfast love that *“has opened the way to a new creation for all God’s children ... The way of the cross is none other than the way of life and peace.”* (Judith Jones).

Shout hosanna, people of God! Even though we are apart, our Savior has come and abides with us always!

Amen.