

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
24 March 2024

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Palm Sunday

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

EXPECTATIONS: We Become Well When We are Open to Being Surprised

Sixth and final sermon in the Lenten series, *How DO We Become Well?*

Mark 11:1-11

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

Throughout Lent we've been exploring barriers to wellness, and we conclude today with a big one: Expectations.

Sylvia Plath once said, *"If you expect nothing from anybody, you're never disappointed."* Such statements, though slightly humorous and sarcastic, are born from the deep pain of real disappointment and let-down by Someone Important "When it Mattered Most." Anyone been there?

We expected something, and it did not happen as we thought it would happen—the promotion, the proposal, the auto repair, the efficacy of the treatment, the spiciness of the entrée we ordered, the ease of our commute, the grade on the group project, the laundry being done, the flight landing on time, our luggage appearing at baggage claim, giving birth the way we had planned, the coach keeping us on the bench when we thought we'd be in the game,

getting a the seat at the table, receiving grant monies for our initiative, the insurance coverage for our surgery, the prescription being ready for pick up, the right to choose what is best for our body, our education and experience being equitably valued, the heat working when it's cold and the AC working when it's hot, the store having "our brand" of cereal in stock, our loved one being around to see the rest of the years of our life, or at least the years or decades that other people seem to get and we didn't. From the biggest Expectations we can fathom and dream about to the most mundane, daily expectations that we don't even know we're holding until they're unmet—our Expectations can quickly become barriers to wellness when we plan our lives around a certain outcome, or even just get our hopes up that things will go OUR way, the way we expect them to go. You see, we can have Expectations, they aren't

bad, it's just our need to control exactly how things pan out that becomes the issue, or, the barrier to our wellness.

The unpredictability of life and our lack of being able to control others or control circumstances leads us to say, "You know life *would be* better if I had zero expectations. Then I'd never be disappointed or sad or let down or pissed off."

The thing is though, that will never happen. We're gonna expect things from life and the ones we love and even from the society and institutions that promise to protect us. Even if you say we don't have expectations, be honest. You do. It's part of being human. We hope for things. We demand things. We desire and want things. We need things. We need each other. We need follow through, and something or someone to put our faith in. And even more, without Expectation, where is Hope,? Where is Growth, where is Potential? Where is Encouragement? Where is Change and Transformation? Where is Justice and Reform? We are better versions of ourselves when we realize that someone IS expecting something from us (and we

discover that we actually have it within us to give), and when we help co-create a more functional and just society by expecting certain rights and treatment and joys and opportunities for ALL.

Lifelong educator and activist for equity in public education Jonathan Kozol, said, "*I went to Washington to challenge the soft bigotry of low expectations.*" He would tell his students, "*Pick battles big enough to matter, yet small enough to win...the world is not as dangerous as many in [power] want you to believe...[I want you] to know the thrill of even partial victories [as you act on your ideals].*" Expect that you can make change, and you will. It may not look like what you thought, but you will make a difference, even if it's planting a seed that will blossom years later.

You see, if we let go of Expectations, we let go of Dreams, of Justice, of Hope, of even, the Kin-dom of God on earth as it is in heaven. We cannot let go. So yes, let go of the outcome that others will *always* act with your best interest at heart, but never let go of the expectation that you (and everyone else) deserves to be justly treated, and that the world

doesn't have to be the way that we see it on the news.

Having Expectations is part of our Gospel calling as a people who are to co-create the Kingdom of God. How tightly we hold the specific outcomes around our Expectations is up to us. When we realize the Outcome may look different than what we thought might happen or how we planned for something to go, then we come to a place of Trust and Acceptance, and Acceptance is at the Heart of our Faith. And—we open ourselves up to being Surprised! Surprised by the God who works in mysterious ways, the God whose peace is beyond human understanding, the God who is our Creator and the Alpha and Omega (Beginning and End), the God who has the Long View (much longer than our own), the God who is “bending the arc of the universe toward justice” even when our heads are so bowed down as we plod along that arc that we can't see it bending, but we keep putting one foot in front of the other because we know, we trust, it will lead us somewhere, and to stop walking, to stop marching, to stop expecting and demanding...well, that is just not an option as a follower of

Jesus. And today of all days we're reminded of this.

On this final Sunday in Lent—Palm Sunday—we read the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, as people wave palms and shout *Hosanna!* The people were excited about Jesus' entry into the city. Their *expectation* was military might; yet *Jesus brought* humble servitude. Their *expectation* was justice that would lead to liberation and celebration; yet *Jesus* walked a road of suffering that led to lynching and crucifixion (as James Cone writes). Their *expectation* was that this Jesus was a king coming to *save* them. That is the meaning of the cry, “Hosanna” (Lord, *save us!*) Jesus would, of course, *save* them, but not in the way that they thought. Whatever they thought would happen in the days following Jesus' entry to Jerusalem, it certainly wasn't what happened. Not at all.

In their book, *The Last Week*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, set the stage for us so that we can understand the power of the processional of palms we enact year after year. They explain: “[There were actually] two processions entering Jerusalem on [that] spring day [so long ago]. It was

the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year...One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession. From the east, Jesus rode a donkey [a colt] down the Mount of Olives, cheered [on] by his followers. Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth, his message was about the kingdom of God, and his followers came from the peasant class. They had journeyed to Jerusalem from Galilee, about a hundred miles to the north...Jesus' [ministry and his proclamation about] the kingdom of God has been aiming for Jerusalem, pointing toward Jerusalem [for 3 years]. [And] it has now arrived."¹

"On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Idumea, Judea, and Samaria, entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers...Pilate's military procession was a demonstration of both Roman imperial power. Though unfamiliar to most [of us] today, the imperial procession was well known [by Jews] in the first century...it was the standard practice of the Roman governors of Judea to be

IN Jerusalem for the major Jewish festivals. They did so not out of empathetic reverence for the religious devotion of their Jewish subjects, but to be in the city in case there was trouble. There often was, especially at Passover [which was, as you will remember] a festival that celebrated the Jewish people's liberation from an earlier empire."² Pilate had reason to be nervous, so he would bring his troops from his coastal paradise in the west of Caesarea Maritima, "Caesarea on the Sea," to the crowded Jewish city of Jerusalem during festivals just to keep an eye on things.³

"Imagine the imperial procession's arrival in the city. [Visually there are]: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. [And the] Sounds, [What do you hear?]: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust...Pilate's procession displayed not only imperial power, but also Roman imperial theology. According to this theology, the emperor was

¹ Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem* (HarperOne; Reprint edition, 2007), pgs 2-5.

² Borg and Crossan, *ibid.*

³ Borg and Crossan, *ibid.*

not simply the ruler of Rome, but the Son of God. It began with the greatest of the emperors, Augustus, who ruled Rome from 31 BCE to 14 CE. His father was the god Apollo... Inscriptions refer to him as “son of God,” “lord” and “savior,” one who had brought “peace on earth.” After his death...his successors continued to bear divine titles, including Tiberius, emperor from 14 to 37 CE and thus emperor during the time of Jesus’s public [ministry]. [You see] for Rome’s Jewish subjects, Pilate’s procession embodied not only a rival social order, but also a rival theology.”⁴

So now, we look at Mark’s account in chapter 11 and we see Jesus *prearrange* a counter procession. He planned it in advance. “As Jesus approaches the city from the east at the end of the journey from Galilee, he tells two of his disciples to go to the village ahead and get him a colt they will find there, one that has never been ridden, that is, a young one.”⁵

An aside: The colt represents humility, yes, because it was not a military horse, but “a never before ridden colt would be

unneutered and untrained. Riding an unbroken colt would be a dangerous task, and the exact opposite of what a conqueror would ride—a trained and seasoned war horse. Jesus was coming to Jerusalem in a new way, with a new ride. He is bringing in an untamed, unknown way of doing things.”⁶ Like a bucking bronco at the rodeo, this colt is not ‘broken in,’ and might do a bit of ‘bucking’ as Jesus mounted up on him—symbolic of the tradition and establishment that Jesus was trying to ‘buck’!

As “Jesus rides the colt down the Mount of Olives to the city surrounded by a crowd of enthusiastic followers and sympathizers, who spread their cloaks on the road, [and waved their palms] shouting, *‘Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!’*”⁷

In effect, today “this [would] look like a planned political demonstration, [or protest march]. The meaning of the demonstration is clear, for [Jesus] uses symbolism from the prophet Zechariah in the [Hebrew] Bible. According to

⁴ Borg and Crossan, *ibid.*

⁵ Borg and Crossan, *ibid.*

⁶ Rev. Eric C. Fistler and Rev. Robb A. McCoy, “Palm Sunday B,” The Pulpit Fiction Podcast (24 March 2024),

accessed on March 24, 2024 at <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/palmb/#Mark11>.

⁷ Borg and Crossan, *ibid.*

Zechariah, a king would be coming to Jerusalem (Zion) *'humble, and riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey'* (9:9)...The rest of the Zechariah passage details what kind of king he will be: *'He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations.'* (9:10). This king, riding on a donkey, will banish war from the land—no more chariots, war-horses, or bows. Commanding peace to the nations, he will be a king of peace.”⁸ True peace.

So you see, Borg and Crossan say that “Jesus’ procession deliberately countered what was happening on the other side of the city. Pilate’s procession embodied the power, glory, and violence of the empire that ruled the world. Jesus’s procession embodied an alternative vision [of peace], of the kingdom of God. This contrast—between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Caesar—is central not only to the gospel of Mark, but to the story of Jesus and early Christianity. The confrontation between these two kingdoms continues through the last week of Jesus’s life...Holy

Week is [essentially] the story of this confrontation,”⁹ and how Jesus moved through it, defying expectations with miraculous outcomes, not through strong military might, but through suffering, serving, loving.

While Jesus might have known what he was doing with this counter processional against the Roman Empire, these peasant crowds cheering him on had no idea that their *expectations* of a “hero” who would defeat the Roman empire would be dashed as Jesus’ would hang dying on a cross just a few days later.

They had no idea that their cheers would turn to tears in a matter of moments. And—as we all know—when Life turns on a dime like this, in ways we never expected or asked for, we are left trying to pick up the pieces and make sense out of the senseless. And more often than not, the pieces we pick up will never fit back together again to form the image of What Was. That is long gone. We must create a new Picture, a new Image of What our Lives Are, or Will Be, Now, which is never easy, takes a really long time, and takes courage and creativity and is usually nothing short of a

⁸ Borg and Crossan, *ibid.*

⁹ Borg and Crossan, *ibid.*

surprise when that Picture finally gets pieced into a new form or image.

But like the people of Jesus' day, we can imagine what they were thinking at first. What kind of "hero," what kind of Savior, is brutally tortured and killed by the Powers that Be, the Ones who have been Winning All Along, the Ones they Feared Most? They *expected* a Savior who would save them by rescuing them up and away from their persecution. Yet much to their *surprise*, Jesus would turn out to be a Savior who would save them through solidarity, by suffering alongside them, and then not letting that suffering and persecution have the last word.

Spoiler alert: the Empty Tomb was *not what they expected* after Jesus' death. Jesus, looking like a gardener, calling Mary by name, was *not what she expected* when she was weeping because she thought her Lord's body had been robbed from his grave. Jesus knocking on a door and Breathing Peace into the disciples and asking them to touch his wounds was *not what they expected* as they huddled together in fear after Jesus was brutally killed.

NONE OF THIS is what they *expected*; it was all a *surprise*, a surprise that would end up changing the disciples' lives forever, as they were sent out with the power of the Spirit to tell of this Living, Resurrected Lord and the Good News he brought to give sight to the blind, to free the prisoner, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to house the stranger, to forgive the sinner, to give a second chance to the ones who (in the eyes of society) had seemingly blown all their chances already.

Rev. Naomi Washington-Leapheart, speaks of how God is the God of Great Expectations and Surprises for Us and With Us, even when WE are the ones who don't produce the outcomes God might be expecting from us. She said:

"[There's a] text in Jeremiah, where you have the Potter at the wheel, molding and shaping clay. You know, the Potter might have something in mind, and sit down at the wheel and think they're gonna make a bowl, or some other kind of dish. And then the clay, well the clay doesn't always cooperate with the Potter's [expectations].

The best intention of the Potter must adapt to the motion of the wheel [regular or irregular] and [the consistency or inconsistency of the

clay]. And the good news is that the Potter—if the Potter is a good Potter, a wise Potter, a loving Potter—the Potter won't discard the clay at the moment the Potter realizes that the clay can no longer be the thing that the Potter had first imagined [it would be].

The Potter simply says, 'Okay, okay, let's see what else we have the potential to make from this clay. *THIS* clay. Not new clay, not perfect clay, *this* clay, still has potential to become something wonderful.' And so the Potter just continues, the Potter is dynamic enough to adapt and shift and still mold something from the clay.

And I feel like that is how God relates to us. God is the loving Potter who says, 'Ohp. Well this is not what we expected. This is not even what we desired. This doesn't look good, but it can be good. Let me see, let me see, we can mold something wonderful out of this. We will have a testimony out of this.'

And thinking about a life full of high highs and low lows in *THAT* way, helps me to not wallow in the despair. There is so much despair. I just want to believe that God is still at the wheel, still saying, 'This thing [this lumpy bumpy cracked and crooked clay] still has some potential. Let's figure it out. I'm not going to chuck the whole project.' Nothing is disposable to God. All of it is useful."¹⁰

All of us are useful. Nobody is disposable. She continues,

"And I look back on some of the most painful things in my life and I say, whatever lesson I'm going to learn after this, it wasn't worth *THAT*. On the one hand I'm saying you know God, give me what I lost back... God creates room for us to say, 'Ok, God, I see that you can make something out of this, but did we have to go this route? Couldn't there be another way?' This is right in line with the Christian tradition. We see Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane [not liking where his life was headed at the moment] asked, 'Isn't there another way?' "Couldn't there be another way?"

So holding together the lament that there *wasn't* another way, that that's not the way life unfolded [after all], holding that **TOGETHER** with the fact that the Potter is always at the wheel, reshaping and remolding whatever reality is present for us—*those two things together* help me make sense of suffering and loss. **The death that is rampant in [our world] doesn't need to be sanctified. We don't need to say 'This is the will of God.' [Rather,] we can say that is that 'Nothing is disposable to God.'** God still sees us as full of potential to **BECOME**. We are always becoming and God is just nurturing like a Potter does, nurturing, coaxing out of us what we will become."¹¹

¹⁰ Rev. Naomi Washington-Leapheart, "Clutching onto Faith in the Wilderness Moments," Jennifer Hatmaker's

For the Love Podcast (Dec. 8, 2020): Season 30, Episode 6.

¹¹ Washington-Leapheart, *ibid*.

It's called Redemption. We have a God that's weirdly flexible with our humanness.

Calvary, if God can have expectations of us, and when they don't pan out, keep working with us and kneading us and molding us into something new, some surprise that even God is surprised about co-creating with us, then I wonder, can we do the same with one another?

When other people let us down, when our expectations don't pan out, can we keep working with the person, with the circumstances, with ourselves, with whatever clay is left...can we keep working with the clay until we surprise ourselves with a new outcome altogether?

Life rarely turns out how we expect that it will.

Our expectations only become barriers when we see them as having to unfold in one way (*our way*) and that way *only*. But when our expectations don't take the shape we thought they would, their new form can be a portal to grace and surprise. I know that when we have expectations of how our lives will go and they aren't met, we are often left feeling cheated out

of something we thought we deserved. We also have expectations of God and how God will act in our lives and how God will answer our prayers. Yet so often, God acts in ways beyond what we could ever expect or imagine.

Much like the people waving Jesus into Jerusalem, the barrier of our own expectations can lead us to disappointment if we are waiting on God to "save us" in the way WE THINK God will save us. Yet, as we will see in just a week on Easter Sunday, we become well when we hold the outcome of our expectations lightly and are open to surprise.

When has God ever done things exactly as we wanted or thought they should be done? Rarely. Yet God exceeds our expectations, time and time again. But sometimes we might miss that if we're sitting in a place of disappointment about what we thought would/should/might happen not happening the way we thought it would/should/might happen.

As we follow Jesus to the Garden, to the Table, to the cross, to the grave, and to the empty Tomb this week, let's not miss the surprise that's beyond our own expectation of how this

week “always goes.” Are you open to learning something new this Holy Week? Experiencing something afresh? Gaining deeper insight or wisdom? Finding renewed purpose? Let go of your expectations that this year will be like all the years before. But never, never let go of the expectation of *Hosanna*, the Lord Saving. We *need* the Savior, we might just not know fully what we need saving from.

Hosanna, Save Us, O Lord.
 Save us from our Stuckness.
 Save us from our Shame.
 Save us from feeling Dismissed.
 Save us from our Self-Doubt.
 Save us from our resistance to Change.
 Save us from our Expected Outcomes.
Hosanna, Save Us, O Lord.

Save us and Surprise us...
 ...for as you do, we know “It will be Well with our souls...”

Amen.