PALM SUNDAY – PASSION SUNDAY

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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March 28, 2021

*“What Do You Expect”*

This is a good moment in Scripture. This is the moment we all wish could have been something big, the turning of a new leaf—literally!

Wouldn’t it be nice to read this passage and to think to ourselves, “Yes, they got it! *We* got it! Jesus *is* our king! He is bringing everything we want, everything we need in life, and we are going to follow him openly, faithfully, *boldly*.

Hosanna, dear Jesus! Hosanna in the highest! Come and reign in all our lives!”

….It would be wonderful to read this passage believing that all those people who greeted Jesus with such excitement and welcome really did “get it” and remained excited, hopeful, and genuine.

I do not mean to say that the crowds that day were pretending. I believe the people who greeted Jesus were sincere. They were eager to establish him as their king—and why not? He has been doing such wonderful things throughout the countryside.

Try to imagine the scene: Jesus has been traveling through the surrounding region for a while now. It has taken a while for the news to get around, but the wonders he has been accomplishing are so amazing that, even in this time before any kind of modern communications, word has spread. People know who Jesus is and what he has been up to and they want more. They want *him*!

They know about the blind man who now had his sight. Now, this man had been *born* blind, but now he could see! [Jn. 9:1-7] It was more than an idle tale—someone knew his parents and she told her sister who told her husband who told a passing traveling blacksmith who took the tale to the next town—and the next, and the next. Word had been getting around—lots of people were hearing about it.

They were hearing about him, and the man from Bethzatha who had been ill for thirty-eight years. He had laid there beside the healing pool for most of all those years, and Jesus found him there and healed him on the spot. All he said to the man was, “Stand up, take your mat and walk” [Jn. 5:8]…and he *did!* Of course, it *was* the Sabbath, and so the man got into trouble for carrying his mat.

But *Jesus*. Wow! He healed him anyway, and when the authorities started harassing him about it, he put them in their place! Jesus said to them, “My father is still working, and I also am working.” [Jn. 5:17b] So, he bested them!

But the most amazing story of all was about the man called Lazarus of Bethany. When Jesus went to see him, Lazarus was already dead, yes, *dead!* In fact, Lazarus had been dead and in the tomb for *four* days.

When Jesus came to see him, his neighbors chided Jesus saying, “Could not the man who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” [John 11:37] But Jesus loved his friend so much that he just pushed past the nay-sayers. He went up to the tomb and insisted that they take away the stone at the mouth of it. Then he called out, he called out to Lazarus. Jesus called for him to come out of his tomb…and he *did!*

So many of the people Jesus had been among as he healed and preached—many of them were there in Jerusalem for Passover. In fact, Passover was the perfect place to spread the story because there were so many people to tell it to.

And as each new person heard it they, too, were amazed and hopeful. This is what they had been waiting for! This new holy man, this Jesus was more powerful than any other they had heard about is recent times. From all accounts he was all-powerful—powerful enough to heal the sick *and* raise the dead. Surely, this was the Savior King who would settle every score.

And so, they picked-up their palm branches, and went in search of him. Word-of-mouth was saying that Jesus was going to be entering Jerusalem.

The adoring crowd expected a conquering king who could restore Israel’s ancient greatness, throwing off the weight of Roman servitude. This was going to be the best day of their lives, and so, as Jesus entered the city, they stood beside the road and waved their palm branches and shouted “hosanna.”

But then they began to notice something very different about this man who was supposed to be their conquering king. They noticed that instead of a big, prancing war-horse, Jesus was making his way through them on the back of a humble donkey.

What they got was a humble *servant* Savior who had resisted this kind of worship for all of his ministry. He had refused it when the five thousand whom he had fed tried to make him king. He would refuse this kind of worship even now because his ministry had never been about political power or a king’s crown.

All of those expectations had been projected *onto* him. I think we do that a lot—we hope and pray that *our* dearest hopes and prayers are God’s, too.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem that day, I believe he meant to put an end to that kind of “magical thinking.” He did mean to give us hope and confidence in our lives, and in the future, but it was going to have to be a hope that is grounded in *God’s* hope and requirements for us—not the whims, or even the desires that are long-suffering and deeply felt. If they are not grounded in *God’s* love for all people, then they are *our* expectations.

What Jesus declared that day was his complete alignment with *God’s* purposes, and God’s priorities. First and foremost among them is God’s desire for all people to know the love of God, and to cherish it, and to honor this love by aligning our expectations with God’s.

We do that when we do what Jesus has demonstrated as he traveled the countryside ministering to all he met: We are to love one another as God loves us. We are to care tenderly for one another as tenderly as God cares for us. We are to *serve* one another as Jesus served his disciples—teaching them about the love of God, comforting them when they were afraid, preventing them from coming to any harm when he was arrested, and many, many more acts of compassion for them, and for all the people he met. We are to serve one another as the Holy Spirit continues to serve us.

We are to make provisions for the poor and the persecuted. We do this when we shelter them and rescue them from harm.

We are to feed the hungry—yes, by offering food, but also by helping people train and secure good jobs; by making sure all people who have a job are paid a living wage for their work; by making sure that women are paid fairly—especially when they do the same work as men.

As you may have noticed, most of the things I have just mentioned cannot be done alone. In order to get them done, we need to educate ourselves about our neighbor’s situation, and we will need to join with others to advocate for fair and equal treatment of all people—and I will warn you right now: God’s sense of fair and equal treatment of others is going to look a lot like something much greater. It is going to look like compassion; it may even look like generosity because our expectation is that we achieve fairness when we can make things balance; as if we could put human situations and human needs on a scale and make things balance out.

The thing is: God calls us to more than making a scale balance the way we think it should. God calls us to sacrificial giving of ourselves to others.

This is the kind of king Jesus will be in our lives and the life of the world. He will be the king who will give everything—even his life—so that we need not have ours so cruelly taken from us.

This is why Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a humble animal instead of a proud one. As he did, he was asking each one of the people along side the road to examine their expectations about him. He continues to ask us to do the same thing, and my prayer for us all is that we will hold tight to our palm branches and wave them furiously, affirming to ourselves that he is indeed the king we want, and even the king we expected.

May this be so. Amen.