

Good morning everyone! Happy Palm Sunday to all of you! It's hard for me to believe that this Sunday is Palm Sunday and we're nearing the end of our time in Lent! We've gone through a lot as a congregation and a country throughout this season and so as we begin Holy Week, I think all of the tragedy and heartbreak we've experienced has put us in a unique position to be able to appreciate all that Palm Sunday and Holy Week represent for us.

I think when this time of year rolls around and we're in what feels like month six of darkness and cold, we're always ready for the new life that Easter and the regeneration of Spring promises to bring us. But this year in the wake of so much loss—And when I say that, I mean loss in the sense that there's been real loss of life and a loss of a sense of safety and security, and for some, even a loss of hope, I think now we're even more eager than usual to get to the light that Easter promises us.

But I really believe that all we continue to experience in the wake of tragedy after tragedy can illuminate for us some of the most important aspects of what Palm Sunday and its place in the life of Jesus means for us, so I want to encourage all of us to stay on this path in Lent that leads to the cross rather than doing what often feels easiest: Fast forwarding to the end when the tomb is empty and Jesus has risen.

Because while this story of Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem has traces of that joy that comes on Easter, it also carries important meaning for us about the hard path that leads to that joy.

And so what I want to do with our time this morning to really keep us on that path is take a sort of deep dive into this story of Palm Sunday that we hear every year about Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem to get a sense of what lurks beneath the surface of it's familiarity. And my hope is that we will come away from this story with a different sense of who Jesus was and the way his path to the cross illuminates something challenging and beautiful about what our faith means for us, especially in the darkest moments.

So to really get into some of the details of this story, the best way that I know how to begin is by breaking down why there was this significant response to Jesus's arrival in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday in the first place. Now you might be thinking, "Of course there was a big response: Jesus was there wasn't he, that's enough reason, right?!" And that's true. But what you have to know is that Jesus wasn't a huge celebrity among the people of Jerusalem at this point in his ministry...

We've talked a lot about how Jesus came from this small town in Galilee called Nazareth, and most of the people there were very poor. And so Jesus's ministry was mostly with people from around that area and with people who came from similar economic backgrounds...they were people who didn't have a lot of money or power so these are the types of people that are going to know who Jesus was for the most part.

But Jerusalem was not one of those sort of places because Jerusalem is where the Temple was located...And I think it's important to note that the Temple isn't like a church for Jewish people. It wasn't where people went once a week to worship God. It's where you went in the ancient world to make sacrifices to God, so you'd go there during religious festivals and observances to make these special sort of ritual sacrifices.

But Jerusalem also had these royal connotations because during the time when Israel was ruled by monarchs like Saul, David, and Solomon, it was the place where these Kings lived and oversaw everything. And even after Jerusalem came under imperial rule by outside countries, it maintained this sort of royal reputation, so it's quite different from the small, rural town where Jesus grew up.

I tell you all of this because on the day that Jesus comes to Jerusalem, people there are preparing for Passover, which means a lot of people would have been around. And on top of that, it was not free to make a sacrifice in the Temple. If you wanted to do that, you had to pay money for the animal you'd be using for your sacrifice. And at this time in Jerusalem's history, it was very expensive to do that, so many of the people gathering would have had money in a way that most of the people Jesus ministered to didn't. Which is just to say that these are people who may not have known much about who Jesus was in the first place simply because of where they lived and their economic status.

Knowing all of that, we have to ask how people knew that there was something special and different about Jesus when he came to Jerusalem. You've got to imagine he's just this poor guy from Nazareth that has made this long journey from a small town to this major place. To most of the people there, Jesus probably looked pretty rough around the edges too, so what set him apart and made it so everyone he saw laid cloaks and branches on his path and saw him as someone who'd establish God's kingdom on earth?

Well, what we know from the Gospels, is that if Jesus came to a place, people learned who he was quickly—So much so that in the Gospel of Mark, something that happens over and over again is that Jesus goes to a town, teaches and heals people there, then asks them not to tell anyone what he's done. But that never works! Despite his best efforts, everywhere Jesus goes people find out he's there and rush to meet him because they hear that he is the messiah.

And this is exactly what Jesus doesn't want people to know about him. Whenever people make the connection that Jesus may be the messiah, Jesus says, "Tell no one that this has happened," and immediately he leaves the place where he's been teaching. But the more he tells people not to say anything about it, the more they seem to. Which tells us that this understanding that Jesus is the messiah is very significant. So what did being the messiah mean to these people?

The word Messiah simply means “anointed one,” so it typically just referred to a king. All of the monarchs that ruled over Israel that I mentioned earlier, Saul, David, and Solomon just to name the big ones, were considered the messiah when they were king, but over time, what it meant to be a messiah evolved quite a bit, and maybe the greatest cause of that change was that in ancient Israel, about 600 years before Jesus was born, everyone that lived in Israel went through a catastrophic experience when they were forced to leave their native land to live in captivity in Babylon.

Leaving Israel behind didn’t just mean leaving home...it meant leaving their way of life and worship so people were heartbroken. And this kind of pain and grief didn’t end with one generation—It carried on into the lives of people for years after the initial experience of exile as generations of people were born in Babylon never knowing the land of their ancestors. And so out of these experiences of suffering, these stories started to form about figures that God would send to earth to save the people of Israel from their pain. And those people God would send were known as messiahs.

If you’re not quite sure what I’m talking about here, you might be more familiar with these messianic figures than you realize: They are part of stories that are outside of the Bible like some of the literature that was discovered with the Dead Sea Scrolls, but even more than that, Scriptures in the Bible like the book of Daniel feature stories about God sending a messiah to intervene on behalf of the people of Israel. Another

really good example of what I'm talking about comes from the book of Isaiah: After years in captivity in Babylon, the people of Israel are set free by a man named Cyrus who is actually the king of Persia. Even though he doesn't worship the God of Israel, he is referred to as the messiah because of the way he saves the people of Israel by letting them return home and go back to their native land!

All of this is to say that there were lots of stories written during the time of exile about messianic figures and they continued to be written even after the time of Jesus. As the people of Israel experienced different challenges and were oppressed by all sorts of forces at work in the world, the circumstances they needed to be saved from changed, but there was a general theme that remained the same: God would send a righteous figure to earth and that figure would save God's people.

People expected that the Messiah would create a big army to save the Jewish people from any groups that tried to conquer them, or any people that sought to do them harm. So the messiah was to be a different sort of king than the monarchs that ruled over Israel. This messiah was to be a militaristic, royal figure sent by God who would end the suffering of God's people.

I offer all this background because around the time of Jesus in the 1st century, these expectations definitely informed who people expected Jesus to be when they heard he was the messiah. When you hear that a king—a royal figure sent by God, who is a descendant of the most beloved king in your history—will be entering the

quintessential royal city during the most important religious observance of the year, what sort of entry do you imagine? More likely than not, the kind where no expense is spared.

So when the people of Jerusalem heard that the messiah was coming, they had a very different kind of “triumphal entry” in mind than what happened. They probably envisioned this descendant of David dressed in fine clothing, riding a magnificent steed with sword in hand, ready to issue in God’s kingdom and take down the Roman government that ruled over them. Surely they did not expect to see a nobody from Nazareth riding in on a colt with a team of fishermen and outcasts by his side as he came into Jerusalem. They didn’t expect someone who would tear apart the Temple and be hung on a cross later in the week by the very people he was supposed to take down with his big army. Truly, in their eyes, Jesus would have been a failed messiah. Jesus did not live up to their expectations of who the messiah was supposed to be.

But I have to say that when I think about those expectations, I’m always blown away by the fact that what Jesus did was far more powerful than what the expectations of the Jewish people could have possibly been. Jesus was a marginal Jew who existed at the center of a movement that would have been deemed insignificant by almost anyone during his time. He valued those who were outcasts, he saw those who were nothing to society as the true children of God. He lived in a time where ANY human life meant very little and showed people that those who are lost, those who are poor,

those who are forgotten, and those who are the least of these, are truly God's people.

That in and of itself is quite remarkable.

But beyond that, in his death he not only demonstrated the greatest sacrifice we can imagine but he also made clear this beautiful promise and possibility we all have of being brought back to life from the dead when we die to old ways of being. Jesus's death and resurrection gives all of us that possibility and hope. And so Jesus redefined what it meant to be the messiah in this way that far surpassed what it meant before.

I find this so powerful because the truth is that like the people who hear Jesus is the messiah and place their own expectations on what that means, we all have expectations we place on how our lives should be and look and the way our faith needs to work in our favor to get us there. In ways we don't even realize a lot of the time, we expect that if we live right and believe all the right things, God will reward us by giving us good fortune and maybe even filling the pews of our churches. And if we're honest, a lot of us are invested in this idea that our faith functions to make our lives easier when the truth is, our faith calls us to make courageous choices that often make our lives far more difficult.

These are just a few examples of the expectations we place on so much of what we believe about Jesus and about our faith, but I probably don't need to tell you that if you didn't see yourself reflected in those examples, there are plenty more. We have all kinds of expectations that inform how we see the world and our faith, especially when

we experience catastrophic events like shootings in schools, natural disasters, poverty, injustice, illness, and pain just to name a few. When we're afraid, that fear causes us to manufacture all sorts of expectations that help us to feel like we can take control of any outcome. But not only do these expectations often make it so we become bitter and resentful any time things don't work out in our favor, they also have a tendency to limit our sense of what's possible.

I want to say that it's only natural that we come to life and faith with certain expectations: So for example, when we send our children to school every day, we should be able to expect that they can learn in a safe environment. When we are sick we should expect that there are people who will help us heal and get better. What can really be a challenge though is ensuring that our expectations don't get in the way of our ability to see the beauty of what is and the possibility of what can be.

For the people who were shouting hosanna on the morning Jesus entered Jerusalem, they were filled with hope and expectations about what Jesus could do for them. But when he didn't meet those expectations, many of the very same people who laid branches at Jesus's feet shouted that he should be crucified just days later. Those expectations made it so they could not see the value in Jesus's life and the kind of messiah he actually was. Their expectations made the possibilities of faith invisible—and the same thing happens to us in so many ways. Our expectations have a way of grabbing onto our faith and turning it into something that's far more like control.

I want to end this morning by saying that even when our greatest expectations unfulfilled, even when human suffering seems too great to bear and darkness seems to have overtaken everything, we can always trust God to exceed expectations. Still, we will ask: Where do we find hope as our suffering goes on and on and our expectations go unmet for a long time? I want to say that these are questions that have been asked for many years and that will be asked for years to come. But I think what's clear is this: Our hope is not in the idea that through our faith, our expectations will be fulfilled. It's not in the idea the life and death of Jesus will take away our suffering or make our lives easy. Quite the opposite. A life of following Jesus means that we will experience pain. But we can always trust that in the midst of darkness, our expectations will be exceeded in ways that we could not possibly anticipate.

And so today I urge you, not to put your trust in your own expectations or those that have been handed down to you by others. Instead, I urge you to know that God's love knows no limits, not even the limits of our expectations. So as we walk this path that leads to the cross, may we all be sustained by the hope that God's love is far greater than our expectations. Amen.