**St. Paul’s Lutheran Church
Wildwood, Missouri**

 **Palm Sunday/Sunday of the Passion**

**April 5, 2020**

**John 12: 12-29**

The older we get, the more we come to realize that reality doesn't always work out the way we think (or hope) it will. We might make [lofty goals](https://www.liveabout.com/30-procrastination-memes-4586531), let’s say, around New Year's Eve when. At that time we all make resolutions, right? Almost collectively we decide to make healthier choices in the coming year. We will eat right. Exercise more. Lose a pound or twenty! We set these lofty goals that by summer, we will be fit, svelte, lean mean machines! At least that is the expectation. And then reality sets in. At the end of the day we are tired. Exercising takes energy and opening that bag of chips and watching television sure seems a whole lot less effort. We had a vision in our minds of what it should be but the we quickly learn that can never live up to our own self-made hype. That's just life! It has a tendency to shove your face in the sad truth of how things really are as reality doesn’t even come close to the expectations.

We almost always enter situations with certain expectations, don’t we? We have preconceived ideas of the way things ought to be or, at least, the way we want them to be. Often these expectations are based on little more than personal desires and not the truth and this is true of our personal relationships with other people, it’s true in our business dealings and it’s true even with our church and faith. The problem is that these preconceived expectations, when not based on the truth, when not based on reality, often lead to disappointment. I suppose that disappointment is not too bad if you’re talking dropping a few pounds. However, it’s tragic when it comes to matters of faith.

What I want us to consider today is the expectations we have for faith? More to the point, what are our expectations concerning Jesus and what he does for us? Are they based on your own thoughts and desires, your own ideas of what Jesus is all about, or, are they based on the truth as presented by God’s? That is a significant question, because the answer is the difference between a life of disappointment and one of comfort and peace.

When we look at both Gospel readings for today, the one from John where we read of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the Matthew reading of Jesus’ passion and death, we see what happens when great expectations, not based on the truth, go unfulfilled. John tells us of that first Palm Sunday as Jesus road into Jerusalem. The crowds had heard that Jesus was on his way. The one who performed all those miracles was coming to the holy city. Messianic hopes were on the rise. Jesus had just raised Lazarus from the dead. Who else could do this but the Messiah, the deliverer of all Israel? Jesus was coming and the people rushed out to greet him; to greet their new king. Loud “*hosannas!”* which means *“give salvation now,”* were on the lips of the people. *“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the King of Israel.”* For the crowd, their great expectations for Jesus were that he would deliver them from oppression. He would deliver them from the Roman government. Israel would be reestablished and the world would know that they were the people of God. Their long expected day of liberation had come, or, at least they thought so.

But, something is wrong with this picture. Something just doesn’t seem right between their expectations for Jesus and what Jesus actually came to bring them. There is a disconnect. Do you see it? The disconnect is between the image of the crowds waving palm branches and shouting for their deliverer and Jesus riding in on a donkey’s colt.

You see, centuries earlier palm branches had become a nationalist symbol for Israel. In Israel’s history, after Simon the Maccabee drove out the Syrian army from Jerusalem, he was hailed as a conquering hero. Guess how he was greeted by the crowds? They greeted him by waving palm branches. Subsequently, Israel adopted palm branches as a symbol of national hope. The Jewish rebels who warred against Rome in 66 A. D. even minted their own coins with palms as their symbol. The waving of palms was not a symbol of peace but a symbol of a nationalist hope that the messianic warrior was on the scene to deliver them from Roman rule.

However, how did Jesus arrive? He didn’t ride in on a stallion. He didn’t ride in on a war-horse. Jesus instead rode in on a donkey’s colt; a symbol of peace. He did not come as a conquering hero, he came offering peace. The disconnect between the crowd shouting *“Hosanna!”* and the truth is that the people wanted war with Rome, but Jesus came to offer them peace with God and that’s not what they expected. They expected a conquering warrior. Jesus gave them a humble servant. They expected a powerful king. Jesus gave them a suffering servant. They expected Jesus to kill the Roman occupiers. Jesus came to be killed by the Roman occupiers.

Their expectations would go unfulfilled because they were not based on truth. Jesus never claimed to be a political warrior or king. In fact, it was quite the contrary. Jesus was continually insisting that his kingdom was not of this world. And, when Jesus didn’t meet their preconceived expectations, they were disappointed. And, as we see in the Matthew reading, their disappointment led to their turning on Jesus. In less than a week the shouts of adulation and praise would be replaced with shouts of anger and hatred as they looked for his blood.

People today are still disappointed in Jesus Christ and the church when their expectations go unmet. A number of years ago, Eric Craig Harrah, an abortion clinic operator publicly proclaimed faith in Christ. He had been befriended by a Christian neighbor who, over the course of several months, witnessed to him. The long and the short of the story is that Harrah expected that because he became a Christian, his life would be one of complete joy. All his struggles with temptation would disappear. He would enter a community which would love and care for him always. After all, everyone was telling him that God had worked a miracle with him. These were his expectations.

But, the Christian community he became a part of was anxious to take Mr. Harrah and parade him around as a walking miracle. Despite being a new Christian, despite never being taught fully what God’s word says about discipleship and despite that God’s word clearly says that those who preach should not be new converts, he was, within two weeks, speaking and preaching from the pulpits of other churches about Christ. Within three months he was giving interviews to newspapers and televisions. Within six months he was the hottest speaker on the pro-life circuit. Within a year and a half. . . Eric Craig Harrah denounced Christianity as a complete fraud.

All along Harrah had struggled with his past and doubts. He also had a drug and alcohol problem, but when he sought counsel from other Christians, he was again led to believe that by merely being a Christian, all his problems would *“poof”* disappear. All of his problems would simply disappear if he just believed hard enough. Despite the clear word of God, the clear word of truth that tells us that we will continue to struggle with sin, that we will have to fight against temptation and that in this world there is no peace, Harrah’s expectations were the opposite. When Christianity didn’t meet his preconceived expectations, when Christ did not meet his preconceived expectations, he was disappointed. His disappointed led to his rejection of Christ.

My dear friends in Christ, on what do you base your expectations for your faith and church? God’s word of truth about Christ, or your own opinions? When you look at Jesus, what do you see? Is it our crucified and risen Lord or are you hoping for something more? Did he come to make all your life’s problems go away? Did Jesus come to take care of your financial problems? Do you expect that your faith in him means you will not have struggles with hardships in your life? Do you expect that your fellow Christians will never let you down? Do you expect your church to be there to affirm you in whatever decisions you make in life? Do you expect that your church is there to give you what you want, as opposed to what you need? Because what we want and what we need are two different things. Do you expect that you should always leave worship on Sunday on an emotional high or else something was wrong with the worship service? Do you expect that there must be something more to Christianity then Jesus’ offer of forgiveness and peace with God? Do you expect some big pay-off in this life? Many Christians hold these expectations. Most go away disappointed.

The truth of God’s word regarding your faith and church is that we have to offer the same thing Christ did to the people of Jerusalem: peace with God. I as a pastor and we as St. Paul’s Lutheran Church can offer you only what Christ offered them: a *“ king who comes to you gentle and riding on a donkey.”* I can only offer you a king who did not come not to sit on a throne inlaid with gold and silver, but who traveled to Jerusalem to be enthroned upon a cross. I offer you a crucified Lord who gave his life for you and for all people everywhere. I can only offer you the One, who did not come in glory, but in meekness to show the world that through his blood, God would forgive them. I can offer you a risen Lord who defeated death for you and I can only offer you his most precious gifts to us, his holy word and his blessed sacraments. This is what his word tells us.

When our expectations are based upon this, when they are based on what the Lord has told us, not what we think or what we want, we will not be disappointed. Instead, we will live our lives in the comfort and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ and bask in the glory of his forgiveness. And so today, I offer you what I offer to all who come to this church. I offer the Gospel of Jesus Christ which he has given us. I offer you exactly what Jesus knows we need the most and exactly what he came to give us, that is, forgiveness, eternal life and peace with God. In these, Jesus will never disappoint. In Jesus’ name. Amen.