

“Inside Hope”

March 20, 2016

From the Inside Out series – Palm Sunday

March Madness has begun. The NCAA tournament is the focus of many people, and already some hopes have been dashed. Baylor falls to Yale. Michigan State loses to Middle Tennessee State. Neither Baylor or MSU was supposed to lose. Lots of brackets were done after that - maybe yours was one of them. What many people hoped for didn't come to pass. Their expectations for greatness - for victory - weren't met - or at least not in the way they expected.

But maybe there's something to say for humility and for what happened afterward. One of Baylor's players stated simply that their team didn't do as well in getting rebounds. If you haven't seen the press conference, look it up on YouTube. There's no other deeper explanation than that.

MSU players were upset and emotional, and so was Coach Tom Izzo. His post-game interview was heartfelt and humble. He praised Middle Tennessee for their skill and their coach's skill, too. He talked about how proud he was of his team and how much they meant to him.

Now I'm not glued to the NCAA tournament. It's fun to watch, but I'm not too emotionally invested. But the emotion surrounding what's happened so far made me think about how we focus this week - this Holy Week. One of my pastor colleagues, an MSU grad, posted (sarcastically) that he was “too holy” to be affected the outcome of the MSU game. He told me I could use his comment today!

And I think he speaks for many of us. We find ourselves focused on things that are important to us, and yet they don't receive the same attention as the more important things. Where is our focus this week? How do we walk with Jesus – focus on Jesus – with everything else that has our attention?

In a group of pastors that I meet with every week, this scene reminded us of a political rally. It's not hard to make the comparison. Some say 200,000 people were in Jerusalem when Jesus rode in on a donkey. They weren't there to greet him necessarily, but to celebrate Passover. And yet his entrance was a poignant moment. There was excitement. There was hope. But some were scared that Jesus would bring an uprising and upset the Romans.

So after all the hope of that day, things happen. Here's the quick version: Pilate comes in with Romans and shows force during Passover celebration. Jesus celebrates the Passover meal with his disciples - what we call the Last Supper. It's a time for them to remember God's faithfulness and deliverance. He demonstrates servant leadership by washing their feet – that we find blessing in serving God in others. He tells them that

he will be betrayed, and they can't imagine it. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prays – “not my will, but yours” - while his disciples fall asleep. Where is our focus? Jesus is arrested - Judas betrays Jesus.

Jesus is put on trial: first by Caiaphas, the chief priest, and then by Pilate, the Roman governor. Pilate turns Jesus over to be crucified to please Jewish leaders. Jesus is mocked and beaten by soldiers, and in the meantime, his disciples deny him and flee from him. Jesus dies on a Roman cross.

Now I know that many of us are ready to go from waving palms to celebrating that the tomb is empty, but are we ready to go from waving palms to the pain of watching Jesus die? What happened for those who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem was probably one of the biggest upsets of their lives. This man - the one whom they thought was going to save them from Roman rule - did not meet their expectations.

How do we live with unmet expectations? We all have them - with people we love, people we work with, with the world as it is. There are so many ways that others don't meet the expectations we set for them. And it's easy to get testy and self-righteous about it. *If only he'd do this... If only she'd think about it this way...*

Imagine how the mood started to change and how the questions started to surface when Jesus didn't fulfill the expectations. He was the Messiah they had been waiting for - except he wasn't. He didn't go after power or control of an earthly Kingdom; he brought the Kingdom of God. He didn't ride a mighty animal, but a humble donkey. He wasn't trying to impress people or play to their whims. He came to be a King, but a king who was a servant.

A king who is a servant? How does that work? We value power and control and big talk and big promises. Just look at our political landscape. We put our hope in the right candidate to get the job done. We have expectations - sometimes misplaced - for a leader to take over and get it done. No matter our political leaning, my hope is that we're prayerful, well-informed, and diligent about our responsibility as citizens of this country.

So how do we listen to Jesus - this servant king? How do we hear what Paul says to the early church? This Jesus, humbled himself and came to be with us - to be one of us. And that's not all! He went as far as he could go for us and for our salvation - even to death on a cross! A line from a Charles Wesley hymn says that Jesus “emptied himself of all but love.” That's powerful! That's where our hope rests!

I think we know that our ultimate hope doesn't rest in a political candidate or a basketball team or a coach, but sometimes we don't live like that. We don't talk about the hope that we have in our hearts for Jesus who is Messiah, Jesus who is the Word of

God - God in the flesh for the world! The truth is: Jesus will never meet our expectations, but he will always exceed them.

I wish we were more excited about what our faith means to us. It's not always easy. Sometimes it's uncomfortable. But what if we were like the guy who got the donkey and felt like something big is happening? "There's nothing better than when Jesus shows up." What if we were more excited and enthusiastic about our relationship with Jesus? What would it be like if we talked about how life with Jesus always exceeds our expectations?

Friends, we know what's coming. We know what happens. We know the ups and downs of this Holy Week. The excitement wanes; it's replaced by fear, by that feeling of hopes dashed and expectations unmet. So what are we hoping for? What can we expect from Jesus?

Tony Campolo says, "We want to think of Jesus as a God who disguised himself as an ordinary man but, at will, could step into a phone booth, rip off his robes and show us who he really was: a first-century Superman. On Palm Sunday we remember Jesus Christ, fully God and fully man, humbling himself by riding into Jerusalem on a donkey not to overtake the city but that through him the city, and the world, might be saved."

Friends, we have hope – not just optimism or longing that we might *call* hope. We have hope that even despite sin and death, even when we know that sin and death are very much a part of our world, Jesus conquers them. In him and through him, we have an opportunity to overcome them, too. We hope in the promise that he will restore our lives and our world.

But hope isn't passive. Hope doesn't rest on what we can do alone, but what God can do in us and through us - and sometimes in spite of us! Jesus - the one who had every reason to be prideful about his identity, who he was, what he could do, what power he had - did not go that way. He did empty himself of all but love - love so amazing that it's enough to overcome even our most difficult struggles.

Jesus will never meet our expectations, but he will always exceed them. Jesus emptied himself of all but love! What a word as we enter Holy Week, as we have moments of deep reflection. I read this: "For those who dare to follow Jesus into Jerusalem, this is the week that our humanity and God's divinity come clashing together in events that still mark the body of Christ. This week will be filled with sacred meals and sharp nails. This is the week that we will watch ourselves do our worst to God, only to discover that our worst is no match for God's best." Jesus never meets our expectations, but always exceeds them. Thank God!

Maybe we're like those who gathered in Jerusalem. We welcome Jesus, but then we realize that the cost is real. This is not easy. Being committed to Jesus Christ with all

our lives is not easy. Putting our hope in God is not neat. It's not tidy. It doesn't always feel good. Ultimately, it comes with a cost. God's love goes farther for us than we can imagine - even to the cross - for you, for me, for the people we love, and the people we struggle to love. For this whole world, Christ died.

So I pray that we would not avoid what's ahead. I pray that we know that Jesus walks with us, but not without a cost for him. I pray we would go with Jesus from celebration to crucifixion - go all the way - that we might learn again - or maybe for the first time - what it means to hope in the One who is Lord and Savior.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.