

“A Palm Road and Broken Pottery”

April 10, 2022

Selah: Life in a Minor Key series

If it feels like we're a myriad of emotions today - the celebration of a parade, the passion of a protest march, the hope for change against power, the letdown of unmet expectations, and the heartbreak of feeling alone and abandoned, then we've arrived at Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday - Holy Week. This is the beginning of the holiest week of the year for those who seek to follow Jesus, and my prayer is that it is that for us. It's a holy week and a hard week if we take the time to contemplate it. We can't skip from *Hosanna!* to *Hallelujah!* because we'll lose the meaning and depth of this week. For this to be truly holy time, we have to walk the whole way - from the hope to the heartbreak.

Psalms help us feel the emotional weight of it all - from praising to struggling - from the palm road laid out for Jesus riding on the donkey to the psalmist describing feeling like a piece of broken pottery - destroyed, of no use; it's heavy and hard. Even so, there's a sense of trust in God's care and love in the midst of it. I hope we can feel that as we walk with Jesus, too.

Even as I say it, though, I wonder what will help us to do that. I've walked a lot this week - and seen a lot and read a lot - and thought about Holy Week. We just returned from time spent in Memphis, where we toured the Civil Rights Museum located on the site where Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed. We've been in New Orleans, where basketball fans descended on the city to watch the Final Four last week. March Madness took on a whole new meaning, even though it was April. We saw a lot of team jerseys walking the streets and even saw Charles Barkley walking around the city before he was offering commentary that night (and starring in a few commercials!). We ended our trip with a quick stop in St. Louis to learn more about the arch and its engineering while also reading the history of expansion across the country - both the progress and the pain.

So how do we walk with Jesus – focus on Jesus – with everything else that has our attention? How will we practice the pause and engage in this time? Perhaps we can take a lesson from those who are part of the Gospel story. 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 and hope. Some were scared that Jesus would bring

an uprising and upset the Romans, and some welcomed it because they wanted him to overthrow Rome. It might have been more of a protest than a parade.

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. Jesus demonstrates servant leadership by washing their feet – calling us to find blessing in serving 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.

So where is our focus? The man in the video said it well - we're tired. 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 like a common criminal.

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 and entering into the pain of this week - acknowledging our sin and the reality of death? 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. Does anyone struggle with that? 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... If only they'd figure it out...*

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, which looks much different. He'd been talking about all along, but it was hard to process. 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. I just had a conversation with a community leader about how important voting is - no matter the level of government.

So how do we listen to Jesus - this servant king? 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! Every Holy Week, I think of 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! Even as we hear those words from Psalm 31 - the writer feeling like a piece of broken pottery.

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, Lord, Savior, 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 two who got the donkey and felt like something big was going to happen? What if we were more excited and enthusiastic about our relationship with Jesus? What if we focused on how we can trust Jesus? What would it be like if we talked about how life with Jesus always exceeds our expectations? Talking about where we place our hope is important.

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. How will we focus? 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." That's what we can expect - the hope of our salvation.

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 - every time. 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. And we need it - *Hosanna! Save us now!*

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 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. There is no greater love than what we'll experience this week, but we have to engage it if we want to experience it in full.

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. That is good news today.

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. It's not always a quick solution. Ultimately, it comes with a cost. God's love goes farther for us than we can imagine - all the way 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 to avoid what's ahead. I pray that we know that Jesus walks with us, but not without a cost for him and not without a cost for us either. 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 because on the other side of it, there is great Good News.

Let us pray as we come to the table...this is a table of grace...