

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. David Pettit
March 28th, 2021
John 12:12-19 - "Putting Your Heart Out There"

Have you ever felt foolish? Do you ever have those moments when you wish you hadn't spoken up, feeling that your thoughts were not well thought out or you didn't articulate well? Have you ever trusted someone or put yourself into something only to feel embarrassed later? Did you hope and had those hopes disappointed? Have you ever felt foolish?

Palm Sunday, with its jubilant procession into Jerusalem, is full of expectation and hope. Jesus ignited the hopes of many who were waiting for things to change, for Israel to be the shining beacon she was generations earlier, for Jerusalem to be God's light on a hill, without Roman soldiers positioned on all her flanks. This procession into the city is more than a cute festival-like moment with the children. It is a moment of ignited hope, and the crowd coming out from the shadows, and feeling brave enough to stand there in the view of the Roman soldiers, adding their voices, waving their palms in plain sight.

But Palm Sunday itself is an odd moment to celebrate when you know how that week ended. Because we sometimes judge things by how they end. In this way, while the crowd sings and shouts at Christ's entry to the city, they are nowhere to be found at the end of the week. We may judge them harshly. We may assume the crowd to be wrong-headed or fickle because, by week's end, Jesus is alone and crucified. They were not real followers; they did not really know who Jesus was. But I'm not sure that is a fair assessment to say that a true follower always gets things right.

Jesus did not prove to be a messiah in the way they expected. They did not prove faithful in the way they may have envisioned. I imagine many of them felt foolish, maybe a little embarrassed, hoping the whole matter doesn't get brought up at dinner. They were there for the Passover festival, they got caught up in the crowd, heard the stories of Jesus, praised and extolled and waved palm branches, shouted to this man to save them, "hosanna," only to see him hoisted on a pole at the end of the week.

So, why do we celebrate Palm Sunday? Is it only to point out how the crowds were all wrong, is it to emphasize human capriciousness? Hot one minute, cold the next? I suppose we celebrate Palm Sunday because it foreshadows how Christ would

save and deliver even if not understood by the crowd that day. They proclaim he is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

But I wonder if the power of Palm Sunday is this: that they came with all their passion, and hopes, and expectations, and ideals, and they participated in what felt like God's promises coming true. Because even though we have limited vision and wisdom, that is what Christ calls us to, isn't it? To give our whole selves, over and over. To not hold back. To love with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength.

They came with all their passion, and hopes, and expectations, and ideals, and they participated in what felt like God's promises coming true. Have you ever done that? Have you ever jumped in with your whole unguarded heart and hope? Did you have plans for how God was going to use you? Did you have high and specific hopes for what God was going to do at that time? And did all go as you expected?

Those who lined the street as Jesus came down on the back of a young donkey expected Jesus to lead a rebellion, and he didn't. They expected one with such power and stories of healing to be able to pull it off. They shouted with expectation and loyalty but soon abandoned when Jesus gets arrested. It all goes sideways, at least according to what they were envisioning. But were they mistaken? Were they wrong to sing and praise and wave palm branches and plea for Jesus to save and rescue them? Should they be resigned to shame for their fickle-ness? Or was the crowd right to flock to the streets, even if they didn't fully understand? Were they right to bring their voices, hopes, and preconceptions, even if they were somewhat misguided?

And how long before they are bold enough to bring such hope and praise and expectation again?

They brought their hopes and their prayers and praises. They brought their surging hearts, which is exactly what they should have done. This is exactly what they should have done, though I wonder if they looked back and thought "how foolish of us." There are times I look back that younger more fervent version of myself and think, "how obnoxious," or "how naive." I think back on that younger self and think that I was not a very good listener. Because I had ideas of how things were to go, I was trying to get everything to be in line with my expectations and visions and plans, which makes you a bad listener because you can't discern other possibilities. But I had hope and energy and gave myself to it, often disappointed with the results, sometimes disappointed with others, often disappointed it did not all come together as I hoped and committed so much energy to.

Sometimes we press forward with blinders on. But often we put ourselves out there in fervent faith and hope. Let me ask you this, though I realize it might sound like an odd question, maybe even a slightly blasphemous question: Have you had to forgive God? Have you had to forgive God for disappointing your expectations, for not coming through on what you thought were promises? You brought your heart and you shouted in the streets, gave generously of your heart and time and resources, but felt like God did not come through as you hoped. You joined the jubilant crowd, but then you look around and wonder, what happened?

Those in the crowd that day brought their hopes and their prayers and praises. They brought their surging hearts, which is exactly what they should have done. And it is that willingness to bring our whole self that makes us open to the mysteries if we are willing to follow the path. The challenge comes in being open to the unfolding of those mysteries. Perhaps being proven foolish and naïve is the key to the deepening journey of faith and relationship to God.

I think of the irony of verse seventeen. Verse seventeen says that “the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify.” That experience of Christ’s power around Lazarus, who had died and they were all pretty disappointed in Jesus if you remember, and Lazarus’ testimony of being raised continues to compel these disciples and followers. It is what compelled their hope and their shouts of hosanna, it is what made them bold enough to join the crowd. But as the week grows dark, they do not realize the mystery and foreshadowing of what they proclaim, about death and resurrection. I wonder if such irony might be true of us also.

Perhaps the culpability of some in the crowd comes in that they were so bound to their hopes, to specific expectations of how the Messiah would accomplish his goals, that they could not comprehend or behold Christ’s unfolding mission. That they were so certain of what the Messiah was to be that they would not accept a leader who suffers and submits. That they were so blindly committed to their assumptions, that some would conclude that Jesus was a sham.

What the crowd got right that day as Jesus entered Jerusalem, is that they brought their whole selves, their hopes, their expectations, their commitments, their preconceptions. They brought it all. They did not hold back. Waving palms, singing songs. shouting – “save us!”

But what they did not realize at first, is that the redemption that frees is more than political power and an independent nation, but spiritual, and interpersonal, and intrapersonal. What they did not realize at first is that all the political overturning

in the world will never bring true wholeness. That to act in violence, is only to perpetuate violence. To seek power, is only to play by rules somebody else wrote.

Jesus takes a different way. Jesus bears the brunt of the world. Like refusing to take the bait in an argument, Jesus will not react with tit for tat. Jesus will not seek political power. He will not take up a sword. He will not seek position and fame. He will suffer. He will take all that fury and expectation, and all those pursuits of power and certainty and authority that come at him. He will absorb them and take them to the grave. He breaks the cycle. He puts such patterns to death and announces something new.

Now the crowd could never have anticipated all that. It was beyond their faculties. No one anticipated it. They came, though. The crowd came with their expectations. In the days after the resurrection, many would come together again with a willingness to see in retrospect what they couldn't see in advance. Can we embrace our fickle-ness? Can we be ok with the fact that we do not have it all figured out. That in our fervent-ness we often miss the nuance. And along the way, the journey will take different turns, ones that we did not anticipate. But are we willing to bring our voices even so? Are we willing to bring our hopes, and our expectations, even our unguarded hearts? Are we willing to come with our palms, to tell the stories about Lazarus and others, and to be open to the mystery of God's love and grace as it unfolds?

Perhaps we celebrate Palm Sunday because our faith journeys follow the contour of the crowd. That is the unfolding of God's hand in ways that both betray our specific expectations and at the same time more adequately address the needs of our hearts.

Many whom I have journeyed with in my faith journey have walked away at some point finding the disappointment too much, finding it all too much foolishness, the faultiness of the church too much to take. And there are others with whom I have journeyed in my faith walk that have clung to those original and rigid expectations despite the unfolding journey. They proclaim an unwavering doctrine, clinging more closely to doctrine than to the living Christ, the moving Spirit, the ever speaking God.

But the friends and the colleagues I relate to most are those in the crowd, who grieved the loss of those specific expectations and preconceptions, but who have found a clearer and deeper faith on the other side of the empty tomb. Those that have journeyed deeper into the love of Christ that does not conform to the logic of the world, or to any cognitive or doctrinal system humans have contrived, but that

can make our hearts more fully alive, can bring forgiveness, and wholeness, and grace and beauty.

And that is why we come! That is why we wave the palms! And that is why we will come together again after the empty tomb, our foolishness and all. Because just as Lazarus found new life at Jesus' hand after the darkness of the tomb, we will too.

And all God's people said...

Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem

(Mt 21:1–11; Mk 11:1–11; Lk 19:28–40)

¹² The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. ¹³ So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting,

“Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—
the King of Israel!”

¹⁴ Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written:

¹⁵ “Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.

Look, your king is coming,
sitting on a donkey's colt!”

¹⁶ His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. ¹⁷ So the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify. ¹⁸ It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. ¹⁹ The Pharisees then said to one another, “You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!”