

Expectations
John 12:12-19
Palm Sunday
March 28, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, “So the Pharisees said to one another, ‘You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him.’”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

How does the scene so drastically change from Sunday to Friday? The pharisees’ comment at the end of our reading illustrates well what that Palm Sunday looked like. So, how could they have so misread it? How could they go from having no control on Sunday, “It’s useless, everyone loves him” to being in control of the crowds on Friday, stirring them up (perhaps even these same people) to crucify the Lord of glory?

Maybe it’s not so much about the *pharisees’* interpretation of events, as much as the *people’s*. In fact, the pharisees’ comment—“Look, the **world** has gone after him” – actually doesn’t equate with what we hear about the **world’s** reception of Jesus in the rest of John’s gospel. Recall, just two weeks ago, we heard that, while God was loving the **world**, the **world** was loving darkness. And, just a few chapters after this morning’s text, Jesus says, “If the **world** hates you, it hated me first” and “in this **world**, you will have great tribulation; but, fear not, I have overcome the **world**.”

So, if – as the beginning of John’s gospel says – “He came to his own and his own people did not receive him” – then what’s happening on Palm Sunday? Consider this scene carefully and one will notice that it’s really a scene of expectations... perhaps more than any other text in the Scriptures, *this* text conveys the expectations of God, world, and the faithful regarding the Christ.

On one detail of this scene, God, the world, and the faithful all agree: one way or another, this procession is going to be the closing statement on God’s promises of the Old Testament. In a procession that Jesus himself *creates* (is he not the one who told the disciples to go untie the donkey), in a scene he *authors*, knowing full well the Old Testament prophecy and knowing he himself is the fulfillment of that prophecy! – this dramatic scene touches the two testaments together... brings the Old Testament’s long wait to a close and ushers in the New Testament with shouts of “Hosanna – Save *now*.” The salvation is here, it arrives on the donkey. Rejoice, Jerusalem, Your King has come. On that, all parties seem to agree. Question is: does this Messiah meet their expectations of salvation?

God’s expectation of this processing Christ is well recorded by His prophetic word: “Fear not, daughter of Zion...Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion... your king comes to you.” Need the Lord say anything else? He promised His Messiah would ransom us, redeem us, rescue us. Is that not exactly why Jesus is entering Jerusalem – to go to the cross and do just that – so that faith’s confidence fills the

heart and faith's rejoicing the throat? Does God not expect that this Messiah over whom He Himself rejoices will give new life to the "daughter of Zion," namely, to all who believe God's promises of salvation. To be sure, Jesus comes to bear the sins of the *whole* world; but it is the daughter of Zion who will rejoice. It is the daughter of Zion who will believe the promise. It is the daughter of Zion who, recognizing the benefit, will say, "He provided this Messiah *for me.*"

And, by describing this Messiah as Zion's King, does God not share his expectation that this Messiah will live and reign forever?... that his sacrificial death will destroy death and result in everlasting life... and having conquered the only enemy that can stop a king's reign, having destroyed death, this King's reign will have no end.

If that's not apparent from the prophetic word the Lord's messenger Zechariah had recorded, certainly it should be apparent in the one detail the Word of the Lord includes that gives this Sunday its name: *Palm* Sunday... that's no coincidental detail... the symbol of the Palm is not our creation; it's God's.

In fact, John's very *theologically-rich* gospel is the only of the four gospels to highlight the branches were from palm trees: "they took branches of palm trees." By it, John wants to remind us that that *palm tree* already had a rich usage in God's *symbolism*.

Palm Sunday sermons often point out that the palm *branch* was a symbol of peace, or political-victory procession, but the

symbol of the palm *tree*, Solomon inscribed upon the inner walls of the Temple, as commanded by God's own temple blueprint. And, after that first temple had been destroyed, God gave a vision to the prophet Ezekiel of the everlasting temple of the heavenly Jerusalem, the temple walls replete with the images of palm trees between the cherubim. There again was that sign of peace and "kingdom victory" in Ezekiel's vision... the vision of that temple of the everlasting covenant between God and man, that covenant to be instituted in the person of, specifically the death of, Jesus Christ.

So, when the crowds are waving palm branches for that historic procession into Jerusalem, we assume they "get it." We assume they represent all the faithful welcoming the King of Glory to his rightful place in salvation history, his rightful occupancy of the Temple, his rightful place on the altar of the cross, his rightful vindication and victory evidenced by the empty tomb, and his rightful exaltation to the right hand of the Father.

But, alas, we find the crowds' expectations, seeming so close, are so far away. Their palms had been waving for the miracle-worker who raised Lazarus, for the popular figure in town in whom to place their political hopes until he dashed those hopes and no longer met those expectations for an immediately improved earthbound life. And, doesn't most of the Old Testament history teach us that – over time – Israel's hopes for a Messiah had become, and repeatedly returned to, hopes of political and temporal deliverance. When

Moses had delivered them and God performed great signs and wonders for them in the wilderness, and when Joshua delivered them into the promised land God had reserved for them and handed over to them, they nevertheless grumbled, grew faithless, and wanted a king like all the other nations of the world. And one would think that all the faithless, wicked, failed kings of Israel's history would turn their attention back to a Messiah of heavenly and eternal deliverance; but history records that when their bondage to the Babylonians had been transferred to the Medes then the Persians, and the Persian king Cyrus allowed them to go and rebuild Jerusalem, they actually referred to him as "the Anointed of the Lord," or, you might better recognize the title as "the Christ of God."

And so, when they returned and began rebuilding Jerusalem's city wall and temple, God gave Zechariah multiple heavenly visions to keep the people focused not on an earthly kingdom, but an everlasting ("eschatological" – end of earth's days) kingdom. And, right on the heel of those visions come the famous words which hint at the new and everlasting covenant: "Rejoice, daughter of Zion, your King *is coming*." Or, in the images of Zechariah's previous chapter, "Do not take your eyes off of God's covenant. The *Lord* will lay waste your enemies, and Jerusalem will again be the secure home of your aged saints, and your children will again play joyfully in Jerusalem's streets."

But, the people continued to have earthbound expectations, a kingdom of this world, a king to gloriously break their long pattern of earthly oppression. Unwittingly, they confessed for the benefit of all of history the heavenly refrain that points the whole world to this Jesus: “Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” They confessed it for the benefit of the rest of history... and yet, improper expectations meant they did not receive the wisdom of their own confession. And, when Jesus’ procession did not yield political freedom, they changed their minds faster than Americans regret their vote in a previous election.

So, the question is whether you, as those born of Adam, follow the earthbound expectations of the people... or whether you, as those baptized and born of God, follow the heaven-set expectations of salvation’s Architect. Your mind and head may say, “Well, I can connect the dots. I know this is the Messiah of God!” Then why in daily life does your heart follow the people?... frustrations that your earthly kingdom fails you, that its messengers fail to preach the full counsel of journalism but only a false gospel of their desired narrative. You know emotional highs when you believe your earthly life will improve or emotional lows when you believe you will know difficult days ahead. So much does this become our idol and god – this temporal well-being of ours – that it becomes our greater hope to hear of a new government for daily life rather than the new covenant for everlasting life...new health for this life’s

numbered days more than new birth into the next life's countless days. And the benefits of improved wealth, health and happiness become reason enough in our narrowly-focused minds and hearts to wave palm branches and symbols of victory more than do the benefits of forgiveness, life, and salvation... and more reason to cut off those who disagree with our plans for society than to separate ourselves from those who disagree with Christ's plans for eternity.

But, the very reason such temporal hopes never, ever, ever come to their full potential and imagination is because of the one foundational issue which our temporal kingdoms always want to ignore because it's the one issue over which they may never claim victory – the issue of Sin. There's the one issue temporal kingdoms can always try to ignore for you or redefine for you but can never help you overcome... your own sin. Solve that issue, overcome sin and death, and all your temporal hopes turn into eternal blessings. But, because you can't solve that issue, your temporal concerns will never be solved by temporal rulers and your temporal kingdoms will never have impenetrable walls and everlasting crowns.

There are two solutions for that: (1) to make all of life defined for the present (a solution that feels good *now*, but is proven a fraud when each kingdom, indeed life itself, comes to an end) or (2) pray that the merciful God (with his proper expectation for his coming Son to overcome sin and usher in the kingdom of his new testament) will bring you to share in this King of glory.

Those who attempt the first solution – defining all of life as the present – seek to walk through Holy Week as if re-enacting it and somehow making it come to pass. Their expectations are wrong, so their hopes are wrong.

But when you sing the words of the Sanctus – “Hosanna in the Highest! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord” – when you sing those words every Sunday, you can’t be trying to re-enact Palm Sunday... there’s nothing else in the Service that looks or sounds like it. When you sing those words, you’re not trying to re-create the processional; you’re confessing that what is happening here is the fulfillment of what Christ once in time entered into Jerusalem to secure. Notice that: the life of the New Testament is not so much about Jesus securing your salvation as much as it’s about Jesus *administering to you, distributing to you*, dispensing to you the benefits of the testament his death sealed for you. Thus, the life of the New Testament is not merely a recounting of or re-enactment of the Gospels; it is the sharing of the benefits of the testament Christ’s once-in-history death sealed, to open to us the everlasting kingdom, the firstfruits of which are already now being administered to you.

He rode in to secure your eternal life, and He forever lives to distribute to you in realtime the firstfruits of that eternal life: “Here is my body, Here is my blood” – the body and blood of the King of Glory, riding in to His Divine Service for you with the pomp and

circumstance of the songs of heaven acknowledging the glory thinly veiled under bread and wine. We hear nothing of earthly kingdoms or political fanfare (the false expectations of which will fade in time), but rather we rightly sing the angels of the heavenly kingdom and hear the divine fanfare of hosannas heralding the king who comes right out of eternity, right to our altar, right into our mouths, right into our hearts.

And, you know what, God prophesied this, too! This is all part of God's proper expectations regarding this Messiah. In that same prophecy of Zechariah, did we not hear the Lord declare – "Because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the bottomless pit." That blood of the covenant is the blood of the sacrificial Lamb once poured out in history – that's the whole reason Jesus rode into Jerusalem, to pour out his blood upon the cross and free prisoners from the kingdom of darkness into his kingdom of heavenly light.

And *this* Holy Week is no re-enactment of that, but now the lasting benefit and fruits of that crowning achievement of our King of Glory. Now, that same blood of the covenant is here, for you, in real time, that you might have the forgiveness of sins and – with it – eternal life, which gives you peace and calm for today... not the despair of false expectations never met, but the joy and anticipation of being brought out of this world of great tribulation, this valley of sorrows, and gathering (John's Revelation shows) with the faithful of

every nation, language, tribe and people – with *palm branches* in their hand – and singing the refrain that meets their God’s proper expectation and greets their risen King: “Salvation belongs to our God upon His throne, and to the Lamb”... that Lamb who once rode into Jerusalem to lay atop God’s altar for the sake of the whole world.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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March 28, 2021