

PALM SUNDAY, March 24, 2013
Footprints of Love: Liberating
Mark 11: 1-11

Today is a day of expectation.
Like the excited Palm Sunday crowds,
 when those expectations are not met, disappointment quickly follows.
The child who expects a puppy for Christmas
 and breathlessly tears open a present to find a science kit
 may very well burst into tears rather than say THANK YOU.
The depth of disappointment, even despair,
 is equal to the height of the expectation.
Think about some expectations that are part of the cycle of life.
Weddings begin with expectations.
We have hopes and dreams for our children.
We get an education with expectations of the doors it will open.
We come to church expecting to be spiritually fed,
 to receive support and care.
We enter retirement hoping to enjoy new freedoms.
We expect that Medicare and Social Security will be there for us.

What about your life?
What are your expectations, your hopes and dreams?
Where have they been met?
Where have you been deeply disappointed, felt betrayed?

Jesus raised expectations.
He healed people, he spoke up for the poor,
 he spoke of a new Kingdom.
Each of his disciples had expectations for
 what that new Kingdom would look like.
Several were Zealots who expected that the Messiah
 would lead a military coup to overthrow Rome
 and free Israel from foreign occupation.
Others were collaborators who expected a Messiah
 who would bring in a new age of comfort and prosperity.
Others were hardworking fishermen who appreciated
 the practical, down-to-earth message Jesus brought.
Yes, Jesus raised expectations.
The people who waved palm branches
 and shouted Hosanna were singing the Psalm

of a victorious warrior entering the capital city.

But Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem
very quickly turned into something very different.
Instead of marching against Rome, he marched right into the temple
and overthrew the money tables of those
who were getting rich off of the temple sacrificial system.
The confrontation he pursued was not against the Roman soldiers,
it was against the religious folks who worked for the temple and kept
the messy work of daily sacrifices moving smoothly & efficiently!

OUCH!

It's no wonder the crowd lost their enthusiasm.
No doubt many of them felt something far beyond disappointment.
Betrayal might be a better word.
So a few days later we find the crowd
shouting for the release of a freedom fighter named Barabbas
who was to be crucified for leading a coup against Rome.
"Free Barabbas," they cried, "And crucify Jesus instead."

Reinhold Niebuhr, a famous theologian, said,
"Jesus always both disappoints and fulfills our expectations."

It's always easier to follow someone
who wants to clean up the outer world.
It means that the demons are OUT THERE.
It was much easier to blame every difficulty on the hated Romans
than to critique ones own system of beliefs.
The evils OUT THERE are ones we think we can control—
we try all kinds of ways of doing that.
Superior technology, advanced education, political cunning,
military might, economic security, religious fervor:
these all become means of
gaining the upper hand to hedge our expectations.
Think about YOUR expectations again.
What are the things that stand in the way of their fulfillment?
Who are the people, what are the barriers that stand in the way.
If only they could be removed, you would get what you need & deserve.
But sooner or later we realize
that there is no way out of the human condition.

No one escapes disappointments and finally death.
We are not ultimately in control of our lives
and when death finally comes we are powerless.

Jesus long ago had embraced his humanity.
He had given up illusions of control in the desert of temptations.
He had given up expectations of making a name for himself
by surpassing the limits of human existence.
He had given himself over to God's will.
But it did not save him from the experience
of humiliation and death.

If we expect that trusting God will keep us from all suffering
we will certainly face disappointment.
As we follow Jesus through this coming Holy Week,
his actions confront all our expectations
and call us to a deeper understanding of life.
We are not saved from all suffering by controlling our lives
and protecting ourselves from everything that could disappoint us.
It is by opening ourselves up to God in complete trust--
believing that God will walk with us and strengthen us for the journey.

Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a lowly donkey.
He did not ride behind an army to protect his freedom.
He did not enter the temple to sacrifice a lamb
to protect him from God's wrath,
He did not change his message to please a cheering or jeering crowd.
He did not allow his fearful disciples to question his trust.
He did not judge his success in life by the world's standards.

To follow Jesus is to come to terms with the limits of our humanity.
The earliest Christian confessional is:
"Jesus, though in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as
something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,
he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on
a cross."

This is not a stance that is comfortable even for religious folks.
It is called irresponsible by those who expect

that we can be made right with God by our good works.
It is labeled unpatriotic by those who expect
freedom to come through military or political power.
It is considered forsaking God by those who expect
strength of faith to be a shield against every trouble.

This is the part of the Jesus story that disappoints us.
We like that he rides into worship on our songs of praise.
But he doesn't stop at the temple.

He rides on--and if we follow, we will find the path leading to the cross.
Our expectations that we can always be in control of our lives,
our expectations that we can completely know
the workings of the spirit,
our expectations that we can live in complete safety,
at some point meet with disappointment--if we live long enough.

On the other hand, what we expect is far too small.
Jesus teaches us that the expectation of love, freedom and safety
CAN be fulfilled.
Jesus on the cross shows us that the only way to truly live
is not to escape pain and death
but to trust God as we go THROUGH it.
Jesus faced the very fears that you and I face,
but he did not run from them.
Instead, he trusted God and committed himself into God's care.
God did not take the difficulty away,
but God raised him up to a new life BEYOND the difficulty.
And because Jesus went ahead of us to show us the way,
we too can find new life when we come face to face
with the limits of our humanity.
That is TRUE freedom and can never be taken away.