

Airplane Mode: Silencing the Noise to Amplify God
The Noise of Expectations (Matthew 21:1-11, Palm Sunday A)
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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/the-noise-of-expectations/

Now, prepare our hearts, O God, to accept your Word. Silence in us any voices but your own, so we may hear your Word and also do it, through Christ our Lord. Amen

March is over, but the madness is not, especially for basketball fans. Tomorrow night is the Men's NCAA championship game between San Diego and UConn. For most, your brackets were blown early on by upsets. Some of you have low to zero expectations for this final game. Some of you have low to zero cares about this final game or any game.

Most fans had expectations when the tournament began a few weeks ago. Perhaps if you think hard, you can remember the feelings of hope in those early days. How you thought this could be the year. This could be our year. But you know what they say about expectations? Expectations are premeditated resentments.

Missouri fans were thrilled for the men's basketball team to return to the dance with a first-round victory for the first time in 13 years. If you listened to the experts before the season began, Missouri wasn't supposed to even be at the tournament. But in SEC play, Missouri looked impressive, and they made it to the tournament's second round before losing to Princeton.

It was not surprising to me to see the online comments by some fans after the game against Princeton. It often happens in sports. Enthusiasts, who had applauded a new era for the Tigers hours earlier, were ready to forget all the accomplishments of the season because of a very disappointing loss to a No. 15 seed. With expectations shattered, cheering fans became angry critics by the end of the third quarter.

Tough crowd.

Today, in the larger Christian community, we begin a sacred week called Holy Week. We begin this Palm Sunday by waving our branches to welcome Jesus into Jerusalem. At the time of his arrival into the city, there was electricity in the air as things began to look hopeful because of Jesus. Israel had endured years of disappointment, oppression, and waiting for a promised King to rescue them. But now, maybe things are beginning to turn around. Perhaps this could be our year.

Imagine with me what this must have been like. If the children who left us a few moments ago to join the donkey parade were loud enough, as we know they can be, we might hear their muffled shouts as they passed our doors. Curious and unaware of what was happening, we'd get up from our seats and pour into the streets as the cheers became clearer. "Hosanna! Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna," which means in Hebrew, "Save us, please! Save us!"

There was already energy in Jerusalem as they prepared for the Passover, a holy religious season. People poured into the city in anticipation of this sacred event. But there was a restlessness as well. People had heard about Jesus' teachings, miracles, and healings, and many had come to believe he was the long-awaited Messiah or King who would save them from their oppression and restore them. They expected a fighter like King David and prosperity greater than King Solomon's. They expected someone who would strengthen their nation's position in the world, and set them free from Rome. They were long overdue for their Cinderella story.

Even the disciples were caught up in the excitement. As far as we know, Jesus never rode a donkey anywhere before. He was always walking or riding in boats. The disciples knew today was different and knew the symbolism. In Israel's tradition, royals typically rode donkeys or mules, and if the disciples remembered the words of the ancient prophets, they knew the messiah would come humble and on a donkey. And Jesus had been saying for a while he was headed to Jerusalem and going to Jerusalem revived national hopes of a return of the good ol' days. I imagine expectations began to rise among the disciples that what they were hoping for was finally here. The disciples placed their coats on the back of the donkey and walked alongside this royal procession with Jesus, their king. Maybe things are beginning to turn around. Maybe this could be our year.

You find yourself caught up in the excitement and expectation, too. You run to a nearby tree, cut off a branch, and begin to wave it along with the others. You take off your cloak and lay it on the path ahead of Jesus; a custom of acknowledging this man on the donkey was royalty, God's promised King. Your expectations are loud now, louder than they've been in years. You recognize your voice joining the chorus of other voices, shouting, "HOSANNA! Save us!"

The people captive to Rome were looking for a royal liberator, a savior.ⁱ In the next few days, Jesus will be the Savior they need, but not the Savior they expect.

By the end of the week, the noise will change. Things weren't going the way they had hoped. They expected victory, but everything points to defeat. Maybe this wouldn't be their year. Many people shouting "Hosanna" today will be screaming "crucify him" by week's end. Cries of "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" will be drowned out by "Let his blood be on us and our children". Tough crowd.

The people who waved palm branches wanted a certain kind of Messiah, a messiah who met their expectations. Yet, Jesus was not carried away by the crowd's expectations or the popular emotion of the time. He was committed to his mission and his purpose. Jesus came to Jerusalem not to seize power but to suffer. He came to us not to overthrow earthly kingdoms but to establish a new kingdom and way of living, one rooted in God's love, grace, mercy, justice, and peace for all.

The expectation from the people was a mighty show of power and force. What they got was someone who told them to put down their sword. They expected Israel to be powerful and great again. What they got was a suffering and humble servant who asked the same of his followers. Unlike other kings, Jesus came in peace, marked by humility. What Jesus teaches and how he conducts himself in the face of arrest, betrayal, denial, trial, mocking, and finally death is the very definition of humble.ⁱⁱ

Jerusalem faced a decision. What will they do with a Messiah who shows up in ways they don't expect?

The crowds in Jerusalem had expectations of how their freedom would come and what freedom would look like. What Jesus offered was not it. Jesus had not only not defeated the Romans; he would die at their hands as a failed revolutionary leader. With expectations shattered, cheering fans became angry critics by the end of the week.

Perhaps you can relate to shattered expectations. Most, if not all, of us have been disappointed at one time or another by our expectations of Jesus. Things don't turn out how we expect, and we blame him. Or we pray and pray and pray and then are disappointed by his seeming lack of answer to our prayers. The miracle doesn't happen. The one we love doesn't get better. The school shootings continue. The divisions between us widens. The rich get richer. The powerful get more powerful. We don't get the job, child, relationship or healing we want and feel we deserve.

On Tuesday, my friend Jason died. I prefer how he worded it for his obituary: "*he concluded his courageous battle against pancreatic cancer when he entered into eternity and took cancer down with him.*" Jason was diagnosed with cancer 19 months ago. He was very public about his journey, sharing the ups and downs with family and friends via social media. Jason, indeed, fought courageously. He endured aggressive chemotherapy and treatments. Jason attended healing services. He prayed, and we prayed.

In the last two months, it became clear that his healing would come in ways other than our expectations. With this awareness, Jason demonstrated what it means to die well. He soaked up time with his daughters and family. He taught family recipes, welcomed visits from friends, and responded to messages until he could no longer. Jason knew trusting God did not mean he

would never have unmet expectations. It meant he could trust God even when his expectations weren't met. He made this photo his Facebook cover photo with these words from Mark 4:39-40 in the caption, "Jesus said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid?"

For his last Facebook post a few weeks before his death, Jason shared multiple images of artists' renditions of Jesus and wrote this about the pictures. "I created this album with the hope that people might see Jesus in a way I came to see Him. Everyone's interpretation and journey are unique, and I respect that. Just want people to know He is more than a political prop or a weapon to be used in theological debates; He is simply LOVE. And He is my comfort. My prayer: May He be that for you."

When the healing didn't come as expected, he is my comfort. When my prayer isn't answered as I wanted, he is my comfort. When the world doesn't look or act as I hope, he is my comfort. When Jesus doesn't show up like the Messiah we expect, he is still our comfort.

So, like Jerusalem, we're faced with a question. What will we do with a Messiah who doesn't show up like we expect?

Author Eugene Peterson wrote, "Jesus does not always meet our expectations, does not always give what we ask for or what we think we need. When he doesn't, we feel let down, deflated, disappointed, or we surf to another channel on the TV, or we try out another church that will, hopefully, give us what we ask for." When Jesus doesn't meet our expectations, as individuals or as the people of God, we try to fill the deep canyon of disappointment and resentment with noise and distractions. We look for something or someone else who promises to meet our expectations, who will tell us what we want to hear and give us what we want, and we pledge our allegiance to it.

Perhaps a question for us to also consider today is this: *what expectations have we had of Jesus that Jesus didn't meet?* Because for some, the noise of that disappointment is so loud and so deeply rooted, you struggle to even hear God. God didn't answer a prayer. God did not or has not healed you or someone you loved. God has failed to show up as you expected, and you aren't sure what to do with that. It seems wrong to be angry with God, yet here you are. Angry with God; disappointed in God because of expectations God didn't meet. Maybe the invitation for you this Holy Week as we walk with Jesus is to sit with your unmet expectations and name your honest feelings about them. And then carry them to the cross with Jesus, set them down, and trust God to resurrect a new work of healing in your life. Trusting God doesn't mean we won't have unmet expectations. It means we can trust God even when our expectations are not met.

One day in the synagogue, Jesus gives his followers the troubling and confusing command that they will not have life unless they eat and drink of him. Misunderstanding Jesus, many inside

the community stopped following him and some outside the Christian community began thinking Christians were cannibals or man-eaters.

Upon seeing many of his followers walk away, Jesus asks the disciples if they also wanted to leave. In John 6:68-69, Peter responds, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

The disciples don't stay because Jesus lived up to their expectations of never asking hard or confusing things of them.

They don't stay because Jesus met their expectations of making Israel and Israel's ways the law of the land.

They don't stay because Jesus promised good health, wealth, power, or a worry-free life.

They don't stay because Jesus satisfied every one of their expectations for their lives and the lives of those they love.

They stay because they encounter something more satisfying than their disappointed expectations. They stay because even though he didn't always make sense, *Jesus* made sense. Lord, to whom can we go? Only you have the words of eternal life. Only you satisfy what I truly long for. Only you provide a peace that surpasses all understanding. Only you can transform my life's pain, shame, and emptiness into something good, beautiful, and purposeful. Only you can take what looks like absolute defeat on the cross and turn it into a final victory three days later.

What will we do with a Messiah who doesn't show up like we expect? May we choose to stay. May we choose to share in his humility and suffering. May we live so his kingdom comes, not ours; his will be done, not ours. May we continue to shout our hosannas, "God, save us!" as we protest how the world is not yet how God dreams it to be. And may we trust, like Jason, the disciples and so many other saints before us that Jesus has the final victory. To whom can we go? Only Jesus had the words of eternal life. Hosanna! Save us! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Amen.

ⁱ <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2020-03-30/matthew-211-11/>

ⁱⁱ Walter Brueggemann, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year A*, 236.