

## Great Expectations!

April 5, 2020

UMCG

Expectations. We all have them! Expectations for today and our futures. Expectations for our children and grand-children. Expectations for our church, our denomination, our government leaders and our nation. It's normal to have expectations. But what happens when the unexpected occurs? When expectations fall through...fail to materialize...and our hope is dashed?

Well, the unthinkable, the unexpected has happened and continues—unabated—as the coronavirus continues to spread and is increasingly changing life as we know it in the United States and around the world.

Let me start by saying, thank you, members and friends of the United Methodist Church of Geneva! You have been amazingly appreciative and gracious with each other and especially with your pastors and worship leaders over the past few weeks of online services. I pray that our graciousness will continue.

We worship leaders have been plunged into some surprising, new roles. All of a sudden we've become technicians and producers and hosts of a variety of online worship experiences. Admittedly, the learning curve has been steep. A few weeks ago I didn't even know how to video tape myself with my iPhone, much less how to send videos via WeTransfer to our excellent video editor, Tom Nicol. (Thank you, Tom!) Streaming on-line via Facebook? I didn't have a clue about that three weeks ago.

The learning curve, however, has not been without its humor here and around the world. Did you see the video of the Anglican Vicar in Britain that went viral? Awkwardly bent over and peering into his cell phone, recording his first-ever live streamed worship service, he suddenly realizes that his robe has caught on fire from a candle behind him on the altar! (Don't worry. He was not harmed.) And I laughed 'til I nearly cried as I read a posting from one of my colleagues in Northern Illinois who was shocked when she sat back to watch a first recording of her sermon and noticed some strange crumb on top of her nose.

Another colleague informed us that he felt weird about the way he looked and sounded delivering his sermon on video. In all sincerity he told us: “How in the world do my parishioners put up with this week after week?” It’s ironic. We don’t even live up to our own expectations, do we?

Palm Sunday is a story of expectations too. Huge expectations...especially on the part of Jesus’ disciples and the crowds as they enthusiastically welcome Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, riding on a donkey. NT scholar Jack Kingsbury notes that five chapters earlier in Matthew’s gospel, chapter 16:21 marks a turning point in Matthew’s unique story of Jesus: “From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” (1)

As Jesus’ conflict with the religious authorities increases in this section of Matthew, his conflict with his own disciples rises too. They want no part of Jesus’ message of suffering and death, or his teaching that true discipleship and leadership mean servanthood. In chapter 19 Jesus rebukes his status-conscious disciples by insisting that they bring little children to him so that he can lay his hands on them, and bless them through prayer. The closer they came to Jerusalem, the more the disciples were convinced that Jesus was going to Jerusalem to overthrow the brutal Roman colonial government of the day, establish a political kingdom of God on earth, and that they would rule right alongside him. Talk about great expectations! Even though Jesus explicitly taught them three times about the true nature of his journey to Jerusalem, they still didn’t want to hear it!

Neither did the crowds who greeted Jerusalem as Jesus made his way into the city. They too wanted to see their land freed from colonial rule, from suffering and oppression under the Roman Empire. And so they hailed Jesus as if he were a powerful king, a crusader (so to speak), who would bring them liberation. Instead, scholar Warren Carter calls today’s story “Jesus’ anti-triumphal, anti-imperial entry to Jerusalem, (noting that)...entry processions by an emperor, governor, or military commander into cities were carefully choreographed displays of imperial power and greatness involving processions, crowds, hymns and welcome speeches by elite.” (2)

Now, all these elements are present in Jesus's scene today (except the elite speeches of welcome)! Jerusalem's elite rejected Jesus from the get-go. But, all the other elements are reframed to critique Roman power. After all, Jesus has just finished speaking of greatness in terms of life-giving service. So, he rides a lowly donkey, not a magnificent warhorse into the city. No elites welcome him. Only crowds of commoners shouting 'Hosanna!' meaning 'Save us.'" Yes, Jesus enters Jerusalem as a king...as a king who embodies the polar opposite of his society's values surrounding kingship. Jesus, you see, is the peaceful, compassionate, humble servant-king who comes to save people in alignment with God's kingdom values. It's awesome, isn't it, how Jesus comes to save.

As we know so well, the "triumph" of Palm Sunday all too soon turns into the "tragedy" of Passion Sunday. And suddenly, all those Great Expectations and hopes are dashed. Talk about disruption reversal...all in one day! The jubilation of the crowds, the confidence of the disciples, the raucous parade honoring Jesus all too soon turn into betrayal, abandonment, suffering and death.

Rev. Mark Zabriskie, an Episcopalian priest, puts things into clear perspective when he speaks of the "powerful dissonance of this Sunday—two clashing moods, two differing sentiments, two varying attitudes towards life and God. But...sometimes dissonance is reality. A grandchild is born and a grandparent dies. The Parade and the Passion. A teenager gets into the college of her choice and soon loses her license for drunk driving. Again...the Parade and the Passion. We buy a special gift and dine at a favorite restaurant, but let an argument spoil our wedding anniversary. Yet again...the Parade and the Passion. There are times of dissonance in our lives. Life is not always a parade." (3)

How well we know this truth as we journey through the corona virus pandemic.

Christian realism reminds us that the Christian message, the Gospel, is fully aware that there are things in life that don't work out as expected or as hoped, even if you do put your trust God and believe in Jesus. What Matthew's Gospel in particular reminds us, however, is that Jesus is Immanuel...Hebrew for "God with us." In the very first chapter of Matthew, God speaks to Joseph in a dream informing him that Mary will have a son who will be named Jesus, meaning "Savior." Matthew 1 then refers to Jesus as Immanuel – "God with us."

That theme continues throughout Matthew's Gospel right up to the very last verse of the last chapter of Matthew – Matthew 28:20 – when the risen Christ commissions his disciples to continue his mission on earth. And what exactly are Jesus's parting words? Simply this: "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

As Pastor Marek puts it: "Everyone loves a Parade, but life has its moments of Passion, of tragedy, that cut to the bone. Yet our lives are not a relentless cycle of 'Hosannas' and shouts of 'Crucify Him.' Instead, the final words are 'Hallelujah! He is Risen.'" We, therefore, *expect* to see Jesus face to face some day, and we can *expect* to walk with Jesus now and sense his presence with us through this difficult time and all the days to come. Amen. (Pause)

(1) Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, Fortress Press, 1988, pp. 77-80.

(2) Warren Carter, "Matthew's Gospel: An Anti-Imperial/Imperial Reading," *Currents in Theology & Mission* 34:6 (December 2007).

(3) Rev. Marek Zabriskie, "Everyone Loves a Parade," Day 1 blog, Apr 13, 2014

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## HOLY COMMUNION & OFFERING

Normally, on the first Sunday of the month, we would transition into the offering, followed by the Great Thanksgiving for Holy Communion. However, leaders of the United Methodist Church, including our own Bishop, Sally Dyck, recommend that for the time being, while we are holding online worship services, congregations fast from Holy Communion. We are encouraged to wait until we can be with one another in worship, face to face, to celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Like other denominations, she recommends the more traditional Love Feast liturgies that can connect people in the sharing of grace with each other. We Pastors are considering that option in the future.

In the meantime, we continue to offer ourselves – our time, our talents and our treasure to the Lord. There are various ways that we can offer our tithes and offerings to the Lord. Let us do so now.