

March 25, 2018

Holy Week 2018

What Do You Expect?

Matthew 21:1-11

Opening words: There are 52 weeks every year. Each one is important and not a single week should be wasted. Have you ever stopped to consider how many weeks have occurred in the history of the world? However, there is one week that changed our world forever: Holy Week! On the Christian calendar, Holy Week is the last week of Lent, beginning on Palm Sunday and ending at dawn on Easter. It is the week the church remembers the final days of Jesus' earthly ministry. It recalls the expectations of Palm Sunday, the rejection of Maundy Thursday, the devastation of Good Friday and the final victory of Easter morning.

This is Palm Sunday, and on this day, we remember Jesus's triumphal entrance into Jerusalem. The scene is truly symbolic. Jesus acts out the words of Zechariah 9:9. The crowd acts out the words of Psalm 118:25-26. The early church understood the significance of the day. Each one of the Gospel writers recorded the event. Today, we hear Matthew's version. Our Gospel reading for today is Matthew 21:1-11. Let me call this message *What Do You Expect?*

Matthew 21:1-11 As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away." ⁴ This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

⁵ "Say to Daughter Zion,
 'See, your king comes to you,
 gentle and riding on a donkey,
 and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'"

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. ⁷ They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. ⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!"

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

¹⁰ When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?"

¹¹ The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

Rick Warren of the Saddleback Church in California once said, "*Nothing will shape your life more than the commitments you make.*" I find that quote to be true. If you find some truth in that quote, say, "**Amen!**"

We find ourselves today in the twenty-first chapter of Matthew. Like visiting an old friend, we find these words to be comforting. According to the text, a great crowd had gathered in the city of Jerusalem. It was time for the Passover. The law required the people to attend, but no legislation was necessary. Everyone wanted to be part of the great holiday. It was a time to do three things. First, they made their annual animal sacrifice at the temple. Second, they paid their annual taxes. Third, it was a time to reconnect with family and friends. It is for that reason everyone wanted to be in Jerusalem for the Passover. It has been estimated that the population of Jerusalem swelled to 2,500,000 on that Passover, and the name on the lips of everyone was "Jesus".

Each one of the Gospel writers emphasizes the size of the crowd. Matthew calls it a very large crowd (Matthew 21:8). Mark says many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut palm branches from nearby fields. Some people followed Jesus; some people ran ahead of Jesus (Mark 11:8-9). Luke says the crowd was so great the religious leaders encouraged Jesus to rebuke them (Luke 19:39). John tells us a great crowd had gathered for the festival (John 12:12). All the Gospel writers tell us the crowd cheered for Jesus when he entered Jerusalem. You can't question the fact that the crowd was large. You can't question the fact that Jesus was the eye of the storm on that first Palm Sunday. However, you can question the commitment of the crowd. In the end, the cheers of Palm Sunday were replaced with the tears of Good Friday. The massive Palm Sunday crowd disappeared. However, their exit did not seem to bother Jesus. The reason is clear: Jesus has always been more interested in the committed than in the size of the crowd. If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**" For centuries, preachers have looked at why the crowd left Jesus. The reason is clear: Jesus disappointed the crowd because his reality didn't match their expectations. Consider this with me:

Some in the crowd expected Jesus to liberate them politically. Look at the text with me. Everything they did was political in nature. The politics of that day revolved around foreign domination. The Roman Empire had come to their little corner of the world and oppressed the people. The Jews hated the Romans. They prayed for liberation and longed to be rescued. They prayed that God would respond and send them a Messiah. They hoped Jesus was that political Messiah. They wanted Jesus to lead a political revolution. They wanted Jesus to be a political Messiah, so they did political things. They waved palm branches like he was a conquering military warrior. They yelled political slogans: Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the King of Israel! The problem was, he was not a political Messiah. Jesus has never been interested in politics. That is a common fact, but some still wrestle with that simple concept.

Some in our crowd expect Jesus to liberate us politically. Civil religion is alive and well in our time and land. What is civil religion? It is when you believe God loves your nation more than all the others. Some believe, it is the cement that hold societies together.

It is everywhere. You can find a piece of it at 3 Public Square, in Cleveland. It is the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument. It was opened on July 4, 1894 and is a memorial to the soldiers and sailors who served in the Civil War from Cuyahoga County. It is a piece from its time -- a heavy combination of patriotism and God. It communicates that the Union victory over the Confederacy was all part of God's plan and it communicates that America holds a special place in God's heart. It sounds nice, but there are some problems with that line of thought. Even Abraham Lincoln saw the problem in his time. He once said, *"The question is not if God is on our side, the question is, are we on God's side?"* Our sixteenth president knew what so many in our time have forgotten. Jesus has never been interested in politics. Can I ask you an interesting question? What do you expect from Jesus? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"** However, the false political expectations in the crowd that day were not the only false expectations in the crowd.

Some in the crowd expected Jesus to liberate them personally. This part of the crowd did not just appear on Palm Sunday. They followed Jesus throughout his ministry. This is the reality: Jesus was known for his healing power. The Gospels are filled with those stories. The blind could suddenly see. The lame could suddenly walk. The demonic were suddenly whole. The always-sick were suddenly always-healthy. Everyone knew someone who needed help, so they descended on Jesus continuously. There was no universal health care. Jesus was their only hope. They brought the ailing people in their lives to Jesus, so he could liberate them physically. It was like playing the lottery. If you don't play, you can't win. If you don't go to Jesus to be healed, then you will never be healed. You can call them users; I call them desperate. They were not bad people, they were good people with problems. We understand their condition and have compassion on them because we all know desperate people. Let me ask you this question:

How many desperate people do you know? The test results came back, and they don't look good. There is some irregularity, and cancer is one of the options. We pray for a healing. Their parents are failing, and they refuse to leave the long-time family home. Every time the phone rings, everyone jumps. We pray they will be safe one more day. Our children are suddenly running with the wrong crowd. Drugs have entered the picture. We pray our children will have a long future. The long-term marriage ends with a funeral. The surviving spouse, home alone, struggles through another long day. We pray for companionship. This is the truth: We pray out of our desperation. We pray and run to Jesus because we have no other option. Some in our crowd expect Jesus to liberate them personally. How many desperate people do you know? If that makes you think, then say, **"Amen!"** However, there were some in the crowd on that Palm Sunday who had no expectations.

Some in the crowd were in the crowd simply because it was a crowd, and Jesus was trendy. What does trendy mean? It means fashionable. The name on everyone's lips that day was "Jesus". Why was Jesus so popular? There is no single answer. Jesus was popular because Jesus was known as a miracle worker. However, Jesus was also

popular because Jesus seemed to hold the keys to a great revolution. Both of those points are valid, but neither one of those points contains Jesus's divine mission. Regardless, I can't say this too strongly: Jesus was a celebrity! Trendy people wanted to be near Jesus because Jesus was fashionable. Do you know any trendy disciples?

Years ago, my brother-in-law introduced me to the term "C and E People." You know who C and E People are. They are the people who only come to church on Christmas Eve and Easter. They make up a significant number. We experience it here at Western Reserve. Our average weekly worship attendance is about 230 people. On most Christmas Eve's, we welcome nearly 600 attendees. Next week is Easter, and we should welcome over 400. Some of the people we see next week will not be seen again until December 24. That isn't being mean; that is being honest. Don't get me wrong. I am always glad to see the C and E People. However, I must make a confession: I worry about them because there is more to Jesus than his birth and his resurrection. It bothers me that they have so little exposure to Jesus. However, it doesn't seem to bother them. Do you think they will come to church next week to learn about Jesus? Or do you think they will come to church next week for other reasons? Do you know of anyone who comes to church on Christmas and Easter because it is fashionable? Then you know a trendy disciple. Someone once said, *"You can be committed to a church and not be committed to Jesus. But you can't be committed to Jesus without a church."* If that makes you think, then say, **"Amen!"** Let me ask you the question one more time. What do you expect from Jesus? I think we are asking the wrong question. This is the right question:

What does Jesus expect from us? That question makes us uncomfortable because we are much more interested in receiving something than in giving something. Jesus expects our total commitment. Jesus doesn't care what you think about a variety of situations. Jesus cares that you follow him. Jesus cares that you apply his lessons to your life. Jesus cares that you love everyone. Jesus cares that you are totally committed to him. It isn't just true of our generation, it was true of their generation. The Sunday crowd scattered by Friday because most in the crowd weren't committed. To them, Jesus was just an interesting character. How committed are you to Jesus? As we face this Holy Week, the word is *commitment*. How committed are you? Do you remember what Rick Warren said? He once said, *"Nothing will shape your life more than the commitments you make."* If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"** Do you remember this story?

A missionary society once wrote the famous missionary David Livingstone a letter. They wanted to send him help, so they asked, "Have you found a good road to where you are? If so, we want to know how to send other men to join you." Livingstone wrote back, "If you have men who will come only if they know there is a good road, I don't want them. I want men who will come if there is no road at all." What was Livingstone saying? He was only looking for the truly committed, and so is Jesus. The question is, how committed are you to Jesus? If that question makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**