

# The Stewardship of Blessing

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**John Wilkinson**

**Third Presbyterian Church**

**Philippians 2:5-11 and Mark 11:1-11 (Palm Sunday)**

We do not know the weather conditions of that day some 2000 years ago, the day of the parade we commemorate this Palm Sunday. There was no Weather Channel then. But we do know yesterday's weather, when another parade was held just a few blocks from here. It was snowy and muddy, cold in the sun, colder in the shade, with beautiful clear blue skies.

We do not know the exact nature of the crowd at the earlier parade. Mark's gospel uses the phrase "many people." Was that 50? 100? 1000? 5000? Estimates yesterday were around 5000.

The earlier parade likely had little organization to it, though it did have some very specific, complex and downright puzzling instructions regarding Jesus' mode of transportation. Yesterday's parade was well-organized by young people in our community, from speakers to parade route to traffic control.

They were different events to be sure, a rag-tag entrance by Jesus into Jerusalem, with his followers and onlookers, and a March for Our Lives event seeking action on gun violence, coinciding with hundreds of events across the country. Very different. And yet.

Biblical scholars have a term: "messianic expectation." What did the people expect in a messiah? What did they hope for, desire, need? That question kept coming to my mind yesterday, knowing that today was coming. What was the crowd expecting yesterday? What were the young people, these extraordinary, beautiful young people with clarity of purpose and intent, expecting? All along, I have been reading cynical and skeptical comments about their intentions and their approach. How can a bunch of young people affect change, I've been reading, and perhaps you have as well. Just as people, cheering for Jesus one day and turning on him the next, were cynical and skeptical about his ability to make a difference. Now we know better.

I don't mean to make a direct comparison between Palm Sunday and yesterday's events. Those connections will be made as time unfolds. But I remain interested in the question about expectations, then, and now. What do we expect? What do we need, and how is that different from what we expect, and how is what we think we need different from what we *really* need?

And even now, as we think about Jesus, we know a multi-dimensional understanding persists. That's OK. We are called to look at all the facets, clearly, carefully. We are called to look, as well, at our own expectations, and dismiss the ones that aren't appropriate in order to embrace what he does offer.

Some, then, wanted a military leader. They wanted someone to organize the people in order to overthrow the Roman occupiers. There is, of course, a military thread in the biblical story, so the military expectation is not totally out of bounds. Still, Jesus rides into town on a colt, on a donkey, rather than a war horse and chariot. This parade included no tanks or weaponry, only people waving their clothes and tree branches. No military messiah.

Others, then, wanted a religious leader. And they, of course, got one, but not the kind they were expecting. Organized religion needed cleaning up, and some wanted a messiah to come and whip things into shape, cleaning house, dumping the theological and liturgical riff-raff. There is, of course, that thread as well in the biblical story, so that expectation also was not totally misplaced. But no religious messiah, either, or at least a messiah overly concerned about proper religious practices.

What they got, despite their expectations, or because of them, was a blessing. "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." That was what they got. That's what we get.

Whatever our expectations, what we receive this day is consistent with the blessing we've been receiving all along from Jesus. A blessing that takes on a particular, human form.

- What comes into town, humbly, is one who has healed those who others wouldn't even pay attention to.
- What comes into town, humbly, is one who eats with those who polite society shuns.
- What comes into town, humbly, is one who teaches with authority, and lives that authority out by encountering the poor, the outcast, women, children, tax collectors, Samaritans.

The messianic expectations go out the window when this one comes humbly into town. That is the blessing. That is the gift we are called to steward, to live with those values, to encounter people as he did, to challenge the things he challenged. To engage in the strange, alternative mathematics of faith, when to die is gain, to lose life is to save life, to give everything away is to receive in abundance. That is the blessing.

Last night, as Loyola of Chicago was putting the finishing touches on another Cinderella win, with Sister Jean smiling gladly at the whole thing, a reporter asked the Loyola coach how he felt. He used the word "blessing" three times in two sentences. I listen carefully for such things, because I never, ever want to equate athletic victory with divine favor. But the coach, Porter

Rosen, did not say that. He spoke of what a blessing the opportunity was, what a blessing his players were. He spoke of being blessed by mentors along the way, including those who picked him up after he had been fired. That I can relate to, that understanding of blessing.

And this kind. Some of you know my father, many years ago, was in a very difficult car accident, and experienced what we now call traumatic brain injury. We first weren't sure that he would live, and later what the nature of his recovery would be. While never complete, his recovery proceeded well over the decades. I remember early, though, a year or two in. He was the guest preacher at a little church somewhere in Central Ohio. I accompanied him, as I did from time to time. At the end of the sermon he accessed from deep in his memory banks this morning's reading from Philippians. "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus," he said, and then word for word, line by line, all that followed, by heart, from the heart, brain injury be damned. That's a blessing, I think, and testimony to something.

But it's the words themselves he remembered that frame for us what our messianic expectation should be. It is highly theological, the two natures of Jesus and everything. But it is also extremely clear, leaving no room for misguided or misplaced expectations. The blessing of this messiah, this one who comes in the name of the Lord, is service, is humility, is following the call of God even to the point of death. That is where the strange, imponderable calculation of faith takes over, that only at that point – Jesus' full and total humanity – do we understand the true depth of the power of God's love.

Brian Epperly writes that "Palm Sunday is about Jesus and us. It portrays the fickleness of fame and popularity. It presents to us our own spiritual fickleness and inability to commit ourselves fully to God's way, especially in times of conflict. The roller coaster of Holy Week begins with celebration and the expectation of a new age emerging. Hosanna carries the subtext, 'throw the rascals out' and install a new political and religious order. That's not Jesus' mission. It may not be ours as well. While we might politic for transformed economic, immigration, environmental, and foreign policy, we must be both 'in but not of' these conflicts. Jesus has strong beliefs and they will take him to the cross, but he refused to be entangled in political partisanship or polarization. God's way must embrace celebrants and mourners, liberals and conservatives, quietists and activists. We don't need to emulate media and political polarization and vilifying of opponents to promote God's realm."

Melinda Quivik too writes about Messianic expectation, of "two unbalanced expressions of the way of Christ: triumphalism (exultation over success -- emphasizing the victory of resurrection) and excessive humility (emphasizing sin to the point of affected sentiment, obsequious self-abasement). The image of Christ is not simply one or the other," she says. "The image is not only an example of goodness to be imitated, nor is it simply an image of taking charge as ruler. The image does not give us either a pitiable loser or Superman. The image is both portraits

because the story is true: the one sent to be our savior became empty in order to be given the highest name.”

As we gather this Palm Sunday, as we gather again and again this week, here and other places, we are invited to give some thought to this key question. Who is the messiah we expect, and how does that expectation align, or not, with what we experience, in the story itself and in our own life experience? If the alignment is too perfect, than something might not be quite right about our understanding. Pay attention to the disconnects, to the discomforts. Pay attention, as you wave palm branches, as you receive the bread and cup, as you sing and pray and wonder “were you there,” to what you expect and what you experience.

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. That’s good news, even when it transforms all our expectations, and turns the world upside down, delivering us from death to life eternal. Amen.