

## **Love at Full Speed**

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Mark 11:1-11

Our first hymn that we sang this morning—*All glory, laud and honour*—is a well-known and well-loved song, and it's one that is often sung just once a year, on Palm Sunday. The lyrics are full of joy and hopeful expectation: the King, the Messiah has entered the scene; angels sing and people shout hosannas; palms are strewn; hymns of praise are lifted high.

We often use Palm Sunday as a time of joy and celebration. We gather our palm branches and we fold them into palm crosses, we decorate with palm branches; in the days before Covid, we might give everyone in the congregation a palm leaf or branch to wave—especially the children—as we sing triumphal hymns of praise to open our worship together. Like the people who gathered around Jesus and laid their cloaks down on the road, and waved palm branches, and sang praises and shouted “Hosanna!”, we too have this joyful expectancy as we hear this story. We come to church knowing that this Sunday represents a hopeful and exciting time for the crowd who came to see Jesus. And we come with some hopeful expectation, as well.

But the tragic irony, of course, is that Jesus is headed to a horrific execution. We know this as the readers and hearers of this story—we've known all along that this day is just the beginning of a week where the people who exulted Jesus on Sunday would be calling out “Crucify him” by Friday. And every year, though we know the story, we can't help but continue to wonder, “how did that happen?” How could the disciples turn into people who deny knowing Jesus, who betray Jesus. How could a crowd shouting “save us,” turn into one that shouts “crucify” because they don't just want Jesus arrested, they want him dead.

We all carry expectations of how we think or hope things in our lives should or might play out. We carry these expectations of ourselves and of others. We carry expectations of people we know well and of those with whom we cross paths only fleetingly. We hold expectations of our government, and especially throughout this past year, of health units and top doctors and epidemiologists and companies making and selling vaccines. And while we may expect the worst in some situations, we also often expect the best, or at least hold a neutral expectation that things will move forward in a way that is not too challenging or surprising. But when our expectations are shattered and things turn out in a way that we could not predict or that we were hoping against all odds would not happen, when the control or power we perceive ourselves to hold suddenly falls out from under us, we are apt to forget about those joyful Palm Sunday feelings and focus only on our feelings what might have been; feelings of anger, sadness, worry, fear, despair, anxiety. Expectations hold a lot of power over us if we let them. And if we hold expectations, then so did the disciples, so did the crowd greeting Jesus, so did the religious leaders.

Let's travel back to the day when Jesus met Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John in their boats, casting and fixing their nets. Jesus calls to them, asking them to follow him and fish for people. And they follow! Imagine what it was like for them, being witness to Jesus as he healed people, being the ones who served the multitude with the bread and fish that Jesus had blessed, travelling from town to town exorcising demons and curing lepers. It must have been a wonderful and exciting thing to be a part of; following Jesus was so good for the world! Their expectations of what it meant to be a disciple included doing so many good things: serving people who needed help, making the lives of those who had been ignored and marginalized that much better.

But the disciples were slow to hear and understand. Throughout Mark's gospel, Jesus tries to help them get it—to help them understand what his ministry was really all about; to help them prepare for what was really coming: that the Son of Man would undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. I can imagine the disciples thinking, "Say what, Jesus? Where did this talk of suffering come from? Suffering wasn't part of our expectations when we decided to follow you." In fact, Peter is so put off by this that he rebukes Jesus, expressing his disapproval of what Jesus has just told them. But Jesus rebukes right back, "Get behind me, Satan!" he says.

Later on, Mark's gospel tells us, Jesus informs the disciples again of the suffering that was to come, and the the betrayal. But, we are told, the disciples did not understand what Jesus was saying and were afraid to ask him. In fact, Jesus tells them a third time, just before they entered Jerusalem, that he would be condemned to death, mocked, spit upon, flogged, and killed, all before rising again three days later. But the disciples *still* don't get it, thinking that in following Jesus they might receive a reward in heaven. Their expectations of glory, even at the cost of suffering, keep them blinded to what Jesus is truly trying to say. And this is how they enter Jerusalem at the beginning of that week, with expectations of future glory beside Jesus.

And then there is the crowd that greeted Jesus as he entered Jerusalem. Like the disciples, they had been following Jesus, or heard about Jesus from others, and they were keen to give him a welcome fit for a king—because to their minds, he *would* be king! Jews at that time expected a Messiah—the scriptures told them of a coming Messiah, and they had been waiting, waiting oh so long. Hundreds of years have passed since the Israelites had left exile in Babylon, and yet they still waited. And now, this man, this Jesus of Nazareth, arrives speaking of the kingdom of God, speaking with an authority that they've never before seen, healing people with ailments that they'd had for years, a lifetime even, and both feeding people and eating with them—even the worst of them.

But even through all they witnessed from Jesus, they expected certain things of the Messiah: he would be a great military or political leader, or both; he would reclaim

David's throne in the Temple; and he would expel the Roman oppressors. The crowd expected Jesus to deliver them, but not in a life-after-death kind of way, in a temporal, worldly way—a here and now kind of way. They shouted “Hosanna!” which means “save us!” They laid coats and palm branches before him as he rode into the city on a donkey. They welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem as a possible liberator. The people expected Jesus to rule as king in a way that they could understand.

But when Jesus failed in their expectations, when he refused to lead them in a massive revolt against the Roman occupiers, the crowds quickly turned on him. Those who hailed him as a hero would soon reject and abandon him. Their expectations of Jesus were based on a desire to usurp power and be on top once more, like in the days of King David. Their expectations weren't really about change for today or tomorrow, but for the past to somehow replicate itself for them in their day. Their expectation was that God would step in and turn everything upside down, but in the particular way that they imagined, not in the form of unstoppable love.

Of course, the religious leaders had expectations of their own, as well. While the crowd sang and waved palms and greeted Jesus as a king, the religious leaders watched carefully. Seeing so many people gather around Jesus and celebrate him was a threat to the religious leaders and the power they so meticulously held. Jesus' healing and compassion showed people that they didn't need to go to the temple to be forgiven; in this way, it was a system which bypassed and undermined the religious authorities and therefore threatened their way of holding authority and power. Plus, to these leaders, Jesus' anti-temple declarations and behaviour could be taken as an attack on the religion of Israel itself. Their expectations were of a specific kind of religious and political authority holding court within Jerusalem and even within Rome; one that did not align with the way Jesus expressed authority. Though Jesus acted with love and compassion, the religious leaders saw only a threat to their power and control.

And what about Jesus? What did Jesus expect in this moment of entry into Jerusalem? Jesus acts with purpose. He knows what is to come, he prophesied it a number of times to the disciples, and by the end of the week his claim to kingship, to being the Messiah, will be known by all. He will be betrayed and rejected. He will suffer. He will experience a violent death. He will die. And he will rise. Jesus expected all these things, and yet his ministry of love, of compassion, of peace, of forgiveness—it never wavered.

So what about us and our expectations? Just like the people in the crowd, the disciples, and the religious leaders, we too place expectations on Jesus, expectations on God. There are parts of our lives that we just do not and cannot have complete control over—whether it be related to our careers, family and family planning, health, government decisions and world powers, plans for the future—but we always have expectations for how those things will play out, for better or worse.

And we often place those expectations on God: we ask God to make things go the way we want them to, we perhaps bargain with God. We know that what we want is good: good for us, our families, our friends, our neighbours—so why wouldn't God want to meet our expectations?

The problem isn't so much that God doesn't want to meet them, but that we approach things with only our own view, our own perspective. And this can cause some major disappointment, discontent, or anger when expectations shatter. The crowd waving their palms at the beginning of the week could only see the good in Jesus being a military or political power that would make Israel great again. The disciples could only see the good in sitting on Jesus' left and right when he came to sit on his throne in glory. The religious leaders could only see the good in keeping and following God's laws and deviating for nothing. In all these cases, though good was the ultimate expectation of each group, God had a greater plan. And it had to do with love. Military might and political prowess weren't going to make things better. Taking up your cross to follow Jesus in exchange for great recognition for your suffering wasn't any way to truly live. Withholding power from others in order to keep people in place within the social, political, and religious systems wasn't going to keep or create peace. But love, the love of a God who is always for us, that love can bring about incredible things.

I read an article recently where the author stated that Jesus can only love at full speed. He said, "Jesus knows that his unbridled approach to human wholeness has proven too disruptive and offensive for those wielding power. Jesus chooses death because toning down God's healing love—to avoid death—is not an option for the Messiah. Jesus can only love at full speed. And Jesus knows that this same love will overcome death itself. This is not your normal power-wielding, army-raising king."

Today's Psalm is one that the Jewish people would traditionally recite aloud as a king entered a city or to welcome new arrivals. It was perhaps said as Jesus rode into Jerusalem. It is a psalm of thanksgiving to God; a psalm that thanks God for God's deliverance; a psalm that reminds us of God's character: one who loves in a steadfast way, in an unstoppable way, and at full speed. It refers to God's loving-kindness, to an unmatched faithfulness that delivers believers away from trouble and into a more confident way of being.

When things don't go the way we planned, when we find ourselves looking at a pile of dashed hopes and shattered expectations, it is through this transforming steadfast love that we can continue forward, that we can be delivered from despair to hope, from death to new life. It is this act of transformation through God that saves, that has the power to ground us in God's steadfast love. And we see this love as Jesus journeys from the gates of Jerusalem to the cross. Expectations are high, but not so high as God's steadfast and transforming love. A love that can transform our own expectations, if we let it.

Because of all that God has done, through all the ways that God has acted, there is reason to hope: hope that God stands beside us in the worst of times; hope that God welcomes us into relationship; hope that God has acted, is acting, and will act on our behalf, even in spite of evidence to the contrary. Hope and love spring from the same source, giving energy and reason to move toward fullness of life in a world filled with the saving presence of God who greets us with love at full speed.