

Expectations Meet Reality

Sermon on Zechariah 9.9–10 for Palm Sunday on April 5, 2020

Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Expectations meet reality.

How about the fast-food hamburger? Expectations from the way it looks on the commercial meet the reality of the way it sits there all squashed and lukewarm in that grease-soaked cardboard box.

How about time with family—something many of us are getting more of these days? Expectations from romanticized memories meet the reality of who these people really are.

How about Palm Sunday? Expectations formed by past celebrations, complete with the palm branch in your hand, meet the reality of a Holy Week unlike any we've seen in our lifetime.

Palm Sunday actually is all about expectations meeting reality. So, what were the expectations?

Christ's Palm Sunday parade into Jerusalem wasn't the only parade in Jerusalem that year. In 30 AD, Roman historians record that the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, had his own parade of Roman soldiers riding on horseback and marching into Jerusalem. They entered Jerusalem from the west. Each soldier wore polished leather armor, a metal helmet, and carried a sword and a spear; or, if he was an archer, a bow with a sling of arrows across his back. Drummers coordinated it all with a marching beat as Pilate paraded Roman power and offered political peace.

Christ's Palm Sunday parade that same year was different in almost every way. Jesus came into Jerusalem from the east, the opposite side Pontius Pilate did. What was the expectation of the people? They wanted Jesus to lead the Jewish opposition to Roman rule. That's why the crowd shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Hosanna" means "Save us now!" They meant, "Save us from Roman occupation!" They called him the Son of David because they wanted the peace Israel had under him.

Either way, for both the Romans and the Jews, the expectation was political peace.

Now the reality from the mouth of Zechariah: *"Rejoice greatly, daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King will come to you—righteous and saved. Humble and riding upon a donkey; upon a colt, a foal of a donkey."* (Zechariah 9.9). What does this mean?

What about *"Your King?"* While Darius the Persian is called "the king" (Zechariah 7.1) and Gaza has "a king" (Zechariah 9.5), the Messiah is "your King." Rejoice and shout aloud because *your King* is different. He comes not to win battles but forgiveness. He comes not to lead His people into war but into paradise. He is wiser, humbler, and more merciful than all other kings put together. With joy, behold your King!

What about the that description of your king as *"Righteous?"* That word has two meanings in Hebrew. It can mean "victorious." It can also mean "true," or "the right kind." How many kings in Israel's history were both victorious and true? All nineteen northern kings were apostates. In the south, twelve out of twenty were evil. But behold *your King* comes to you *righteous!*

What about the description of your king as “*saved?*” The English Standard Version from which we read earlier actually says, “*having salvation.*” That makes sense. Why would your king need to *be saved*? But the Hebrew verb, there, is not active, “*having salvation.*” It’s passive, “*being saved.*” Kings are often called to be passive in relation to God. Kings are, for example, dependent on God alone for victory. This *passive* idea also fits very well with Isaiah’s Fourth Servant Song where there are fifteen passive verbs that describe the Servant (Isaiah 52.13–53.13). Here are eight of them: “*He was despised*” (53.2); “*He was wounded . . . He was crushed*” (53.5); “*He was oppressed . . . He was afflicted*” (53.7); “*He was taken away . . . He was cut off*” (53.8); “*He was numbered*” (53.12). So, your King is also being saved.

Next comes the fact that He was “*humble and riding on a donkey.*” Pontius Pilate didn’t put his soldiers on donkeys. What kind of army would that be? No, it’s horses and chariots that display power. But Jesus rides a donkey because His kingdom is not of this world. His Church bears that same character. Expectations power and influence meet the reality of God’s power hidden in weakness. Jesus has no chariots or army, no sword or spear. “*Behold, your King comes to you humble and riding on a donkey.*”

It is no wonder that many people did not receive Jesus! He did not meet their expectations. By Friday, Jesus was hanging on a cross under a sign that said, “*Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*” (Matthew 27.37). People expect their leaders, their kings, to have *power*. But in looking for *power*, they missed seeing God Himself hidden in weakness. In looking for power, they missed the *peace* that He brings.

But here is the good news. God turned the darkness of Good Friday into the light of Easter. God turned the cross and suffering into an empty tomb and rejoicing. God turned His passion into peace for all people. Zechariah 9.10: “*And I will cut off chariots from Ephraim, and the horse from Jerusalem, and the bow of warfare will be cut off. And he [that is, your king] will speak peace to the nations. And his rule will be from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.*”

This is the kind of peace we all need! In Hebrew, peace is *shalom*, that is, *wellness* or *wholeness*. It is the peace that brings order out of chaos; goodness out of tragedy; and hope out of despair. It is the peace that is able to take all the pieces of our broken lives and make us whole. The angels sang about His peace when He was born. Jesus gave His disciples His peace just before He died (John 14.27). Jesus’ bloody death makes peace with God (Romans 5.1). Now God delivers that peace won by Christ to you in concrete ways: He delivers it through the Gospel, through Baptism, and through the Lord’s Supper. These are the ways Jesus Christ, your King, takes the pieces of your broken life and makes you whole.

Pontius Pilate might have been a part of the *Pax Romana*, but that peace would come to an end. Jesus Christ, your King, comes to bring you a peace that endures forever. That did not meet the expectations of the people. So, Judas betrayed Him, Peter denied Him. All the disciples abandoned Him. The world expected something different. They wanted a different Savior. So, just as it was a one-man parade into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, so, on Good Friday, it was a one-man parade to the cross.

Sometimes, we might want a different Savior, too. We might want a Savior who instantly changes our circumstances, destroys our enemies, removes our problems, and gives us the kind of peace we think we need. Expectations meet reality. Your King came to do so much more. The reality is Jesus suffered and died to give you eternal peace with God. The reality is He calls you to take up your cross. The reality is His power is made perfect in weakness, and that includes you and His whole Church. “*Behold, your King comes to you, righteous and saved, riding on a donkey . . . and delivering peace!*”

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Redeemer's Refinery

Sermon on Zechariah 13.1–2 for Lent 5A Midweek on April 1, 2020

Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I was in grade school, my family lived in St. Louis and my grandparents lived in Chicago. I remember many trips on Interstate-55. It's a boring stretch of road, especially for a little kid in the back seat who can only count so many fenceposts and look for so many states on license plates. There are very few landmarks to help gauge the distance, prompting the prevalent, "Are we there, yet?"

There was one big landmark, though, that always helped me know that we were getting close to Grandma and Grandpa's house. I still think about it when we drive past it now. There is a huge Exxonmobil oil refinery, just south of the Des Plaines River right on I-55. You can't miss it. At night, it is all lit up like a city. When I saw that refinery, I knew we were getting close to where we needed to be.

Oil refineries take crude oil, oil in its natural state, and refine it into gasoline, diesel fuel, heating oil, kerosene, liquefied petroleum gas, jet fuel, and stuff like that.

That's a picture of our souls. There is a crude substance oozing inside us. Souls in their nature state are gunked up with sensitive, bitter, angry, judgmental, self-centered, fake, hypocritical, mean-spirited stuff. It comes out every day. Someone gives us lip and we give that lip right back. Stress builds and we lose our temper. Someone shares a juicy morsel of gossip and we can't wait to pass it on, sprinkling it with our own sarcastic seasoning. We see others as burdens to be borne rather than people to be loved.

The good news for us is that God has set up a refinery to purify and cleanse our souls. To find out what it is, let's look at Zechariah 13.1: "*On that day a fountain will be opened.*"

The term "*fountain,*" refers to a fountain of living water. Zechariah 14.8: "*On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem.*" "Living water," though, implies that there is something else like "dead water." Dead water is stagnant. It's the same sin day after day. Dead water is the same argument, the same habit, the same attitude day after day. But through Zechariah, God promises a fountain of living water that refines and purifies our souls. He says that it will be opened. Church isn't "open" as usual right now. Many places we'd really enjoy going are closed right now. How good to know that this fountain God provides for us is never closed! It's always open. Not only that, but it's always free.

In the Old Testament, it was not this way. Remember now God refined His people then through animal sacrifices? There were sin offerings, peace offerings, freewill offerings, guilt offerings—dead bulls and lambs and goats and rams. These refined God's people at that time and place, but they also pointed forward to something greater; a greater cleansing, a greater refining. All Zechariah could see from his vantage point was a fountain of living water that would be opened to cleanse God's people.

During the summer between my senior year of college and my first year of seminary, I worked for a man who owned apartment buildings in St. Louis. He rented to college kids and he needed summer-help to repair and paint the walls of those apartments before classes began again in the fall. I went home every day covered in drywall dust, plaster, caulk, and little specks of paint. I was also soaked with sweat. I stank! I needed one thing. A change of clothes wasn't it. I needed a shower.

Humanity stinks like sin in the all-sensitive nose of God. We're covered in it, but we're nose-blind. We are around our own stench so much, we don't even smell how foul we are! We might not even think we need cleansing. We might think we can throw a little of our own "good work" on it and be good.

In 590 AD, Pope Gregory I came up with that list called *The Seven Deadly Sins*:

Lust—I want what I want and I want it right now.

Envy—I want what you have and I want it right now.

Greed—I want more of what I have and I want it right now.

Sloth—I have no drive or desire and I don't want to do anything with my life—right now or ever.

Wrath—I'm full of anger and rage and I'm going to dump it on you right now.

Pride—I'm better than you, richer than you, younger than you, and smarter than you now and forever!

Gluttony—I'm going to indulge myself with whatever I want and I will do it right now!

Those sins that cake our souls stink. Like death. "Foul, I to the fountain fly; Wash me, Savior, or I die" (LSB 761.3).

So, where is this fountain? Where is the Redeemer's Refinery? Zechariah 12.10: "*They will gaze upon me whom they have pierced.*" God pierced? With what? The tip of a spear. Where? On Calvary. The Roman soldier split open our Savior's side. John 19.34: "*There was a sudden flow of blood and water.*" So, living water flows from Jesus' dead body, a river flows from a tree, and Jesus was covered in our deadly sin in order to cover us with a cleansing flood.

How does that water reach us? It reaches us through Holy Baptism. Like a pipeline, Baptism carries living, purifying water from the cross to you. It gives you Christ's atonement for sin, it washes away your guilt, pays your debt, forgives your sins, and sets you free from death and hell. Baptism, this free and cleansing gift of God, opens heaven for you. When? Right now. Here and now a "pure and healing fountain flows for you, for me, for all, in a full, perpetual tied, opened when our Savior died" (LSB 435.1).

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.