

March 24: Reimagine (*Mark 11:1-11*) – Pastor Heather McDaniel

Our Palm Sunday Scripture reading comes from the Narrative Lectionary—a year-long collection of readings that help us trace a particular theme throughout the Bible’s big story: the theme of “Love in Action.” In each week’s passage, there’s a compelling action verb embedded in the narrative, which we’re invited to ponder and practice. Of course, we know that *love* is the most important verb of all, and that every action we do is rooted in God’s boundless, active love for us and for all creation. And our ultimate goal as we come to God’s word and let it speak to us is to increase in love towards God and each other, love that’s lived out so that our world can receive and reflect it. Please pray with me before we dive into our text.

God of love, give my words life today, and may they be true to you and who you are. May each person who listens this morning hear your message of hope that will not fail, even when our expectations crumble. Amen.

Since I was very little, I’ve struggled with expectations – or more specifically, with the gap between the ideal picture I create in my head about what a situation or event or life in general will be like, and the reality. My characteristic response to this gap as a child was a trembling lip, a tragic face, and the quavering declaration, “I’m just so disappointed...”

When Luke and I got engaged – almost 24 years ago – and he called my parents to ask for their blessing, my father didn’t give him the traditional grilling about himself and whether he was worthy of my hand. No, my father gave Luke a warning about me – specifically about my expectations. He warned Luke that he would, at some point, fail to live up to them, despite his best efforts – a warning that came all too true on our first anniversary, which I decided to let Luke plan completely on his own and surprise me. The only guideline I gave him was that I’d like to spend a little time praying together and committing our future to God.

As the day drew near, I created delicious scenarios in my head about the incredible afternoon Luke might be devising. Would it involve a fancy restaurant, or maybe a concert? Our anniversary was on a Sunday in June, and the day dawned sunny and beautiful – it was perfect. I put on the kind of dress that was just right for summer romance and hopped in the car with Luke to see where he would take me. As we headed out in the direction of the city of Raleigh, my excitement built.

After a drive of happy anticipation, we finally reached our destination, a place I never, in my wildest dreams, imagined – a convent. Since the only clue I had given Luke about my expectations was that I'd like to spend some time praying together, he had booked a retreat room at a local convent for the full afternoon, and packed a lovely picnic for us to enjoy together as we talked and prayed. As the nuns welcomed us and showed us back to our retreat room and the adjoining garden, I struggled wildly to recalibrate my expectations to the reality of spending our first anniversary cloistered at a nunnery. My battle to reimagine our afternoon and accept the adventure given to me with joy went on for about an hour before I succumbed to defeat – my face crumpled, my lower lip trembled, and I reverted to some version of my childhood refrain – “I’m just so disappointed...”

A little like my own story, Jesus’ “triumphal entry” to Jerusalem is a tale of expectations built high and then disappointed – a hint that the week to come is going to brutally disrupt and shatter the way Jesus’ followers imagined their story with him would play out. Yet, from the ashes of their dead Palm Sunday expectations, Jesus’ followers would rise on Easter morning to discover a world made new, where they were invited to reimagine everything they thought they knew in the dazzling light of a crucified and resurrected Messiah. And as we dig into their story, I invite you to bring your own shattered expectations to the cross of Jesus, and to dare to believe that even when our expectations in this world are disappointed, Jesus is faithful to fulfill our deepest hopes, needs, and longings, beyond what we can even imagine.

My ideas about how my first wedding anniversary would play out were shaped by stories and images I grew up with – love songs, television shows and movie clips, and the cultural idea that a man is supposed to plan and execute romantic, exciting dates for a woman. In the same way, when Jesus rode into the great city of David in a public and ceremonial way, to the waving of palms and the shouts and acclamations of a crowd of pilgrims, there were stories and images that formed his followers’ expectations of what he would do and accomplish there. Let me share some of the well-known stories that would have shaped how people understood Jesus’ triumphal entrance, as well as what they might have expected afterwards.

The first story I want to share is the legendary coronation of Solomon, the son of King David who sat on his father’s donkey (or colt) and rode into Jerusalem,

preceded by a trumpet blast and followed by a host of people, “playing on pipes and rejoicing greatly, so that the ground shook with the sound” (1 Kings 1:38). Solomon’s subsequent reign ushered in the golden age of the Kingdom of Israel – the time of their greatest world prominence and prosperity.

Unfortunately, Solomon’s glorious rule was also exploitative and oppressive and led to the permanent split of the kingdom. So our second story comes from a darker time in Israel’s history – the second century BCE, after war and exile, when the people of Israel had returned to their homeland but were under the thumb of the brutal Seleucid ruler Antiochus Epiphanes, who sacked Jerusalem, defiled the temple, and tortured those who openly practiced Judaism. The heroic Maccabeus brothers led a successful revolt, liberating Jerusalem, purifying the temple, and restoring worship there, an event still remembered every Hannukah. The book of 1 Maccabees records how, after the citadel of Jerusalem was freed and cleansed from its enemies, Simon Maccabeus entered the city “with praise and palm branches, and with harps and cymbals and stringed instruments, and with hymns and songs, because a great enemy had been crushed and removed from Israel.” (1 Macc. 13:51)

But the royal dynasty set up by the Maccabees quickly turned corrupt and weak and paved the way for Roman takeover. By the time of Jesus, Israel was once again an occupied nation, under the thumb of Rome. And so the third story that would have been triggered by Jesus’ entry was a glorious tale of future hope for Israel, hinted at by Israel’s prophets and spun into multiple popular narratives about a conquering Messiah of Davidic lineage who would deliver his people by boldly riding into the city of David, retaking David’s throne, driving out Israel’s enemies, reestablishing national sovereignty, and transforming Israel into a utopian paradise. He’d be a liberator like the Maccabeus brothers and a king like Solomon, but much, much greater.

And here’s the thing: throughout today’s passage, Jesus allows people to speculate that he is entering Jerusalem as this hoped-for Messiah and King – in fact, in some ways, he seems to encourage Messianic expectations. It was the time of Passover, where pilgrims were supposed to enter Jerusalem on foot, but Jesus arranges a donkey to ride – an animal that was traditionally a mount of kings, particularly if it had never been ridden by anyone else – Solomon rode one to his coronation, and the prophet Zechariah wrote that Jerusalem’s king would come to her “righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey” (Zech. 9:9). Jesus even exercises the right of a king to requisition an

animal (although I love the detail that he promises to return it). He enters Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, which was associated with God's judgment and the coming Messiah. And he's hailed as a possible king and conqueror by the crowd, similar to how Solomon and Simon Maccabeus were hailed – cloaks thrown down, palm branches (a nationalistic symbol) waved, calls of "Hosanna" (which means "God save us") from Psalm 118, and shouts hailing the coming Kingdom of David.

I can only imagine the heightened expectations of Jesus' disciples after an entrance like this, particularly as Jesus approached the temple. Jesus had been making troubling and hard-to-understand predictions about suffering and death awaiting him in Jerusalem, but the way that he entered the city must have renewed their hopes of a victorious Messiah. They had been following him for years, in hope and faith that he was the One they had been waiting for, and it looked like the day had finally come. Things were going to happen.

And that's what makes the end of today's passage particularly anticlimactic. After all that set-up and pomp and circumstance and heightened expectations, in verse 11, Jesus and his followers go into the Temple, and after looking around carefully at everything, leave because it was late in the afternoon, and return to Bethany for the night.

If this passage had a sound track, there would be dramatic, swelling music, and just as it was climaxing, it would suddenly trail off into a pathetic "womp, womp". If I was disappointed on my first anniversary because I expected a romantic afternoon and ended up in a nunnery, I can only imagine what it was like for the disciples of Jesus to begin their day cheering their Messiah and king in his triumphal entry, watch for him to commence his overthrow of Roman occupation, and then leave the city quietly because it was late.

And this was just the soft beginning to a week that would forever shatter any remaining illusions of a conquering hero or ruling king. Jesus returned the next day to disrupt the temple and antagonize its leaders, then did nothing to prevent their unjust accusations and efforts to do away with him. Instead of fighting the Romans, he willingly surrendered when they came to arrest him. And when he finally publicly proclaimed that he was the Messiah, he was on trial, when he knew that such a confession would lead directly to his condemnation to death – and it did. For those who had given up everything to follow Jesus, it was a week of confusion and disaster.

And here's the question I held as I lived with this passage: Jesus knew he had come to Jerusalem to suffer, submit, and die – so why did he allow and even engineer an entrance that would enflame false Messianic expectations, especially since he'd been trying to set the disciples straight the whole way to Jerusalem? It seemed almost cruel.

I think that Jesus deliberately entered Jerusalem in the way that he did, first, because he *is* the Messiah and King, the One everyone had been looking for, and he'd come to deliver and save and fulfill the prophecies. But I wonder if perhaps Jesus deliberately brought popular Messianic expectations to the surface with his dramatic entrance so that they could be put to death along with him, because it was by finally letting those false expectations die that Jesus' followers could begin to reimagine what the true Messiah is like: a servant-King who would deliver them not by defeating their enemies, but by loving and dying as a ransom for them, defeating the powers of violence and domination that create enemies in the first place. Jesus would conquer by allowing the full weight of the world's brokenness and sin and suffering and injustice to engulf him, as an innocent man who is fully divine, until evil itself was undone and death turned backwards. He would love his followers to the end not by leading them into battle but by enduring their own betrayal, denial, and abandonment and then laying down his life for them.

All of this is part of what Jesus' followers would figure out in the days and years following Easter Sunday, as they readjusted their vision to the blazing, dazing light of a world where all things are being made new and death no longer marks the end of the story. As they met the eyes of their resurrected Lord and he breathed peace upon them, they finally begin to reimagine who their Messiah truly was, a crucified savior who failed to meet their expectations but fulfilled their deepest hopes and needs and longings, beyond what they ever asked or imagined. And they began to reimagine their own lives made new, and to boldly live into that reality.

Like the disciples at the end of Palm Sunday when nothing happened, all of us have expectations and dreams and prayers that have been disappointed or will be disappointed. Life never turns out exactly the way we imagine. Sometimes, we can look at those failed expectations and smile, like I do when I think about our first anniversary. But there are also failed expectations that are harsh and tragic – like watching your family suffer and your plans for the future implode because of a global pandemic, or having your anticipated retirement disrupted

by serious illness, or seeing a relationship you expected to last forever fall apart – I could go on and on. Sometimes the path we are forced to walk is just plain hard, and we're never given a reason why. And Jesus doesn't promise us anything different if we follow him – we're not exempt from the world's pain and heartbreak.

But we follow a God who has chosen to suffer with us in the anguish of broken expectations and dreams. He knows what it's like to throw yourself face-first on the ground and beseech God for an easier road than the one you've been given, and then get up and find your path unchanged. And he freely chose to walk that hard path in solidarity with us because he loves us, and by his wounds we are healed. I love this quote from Bonaventure, a 13th century saint, as he meditated on Jesus' crucifixion: "See now, my soul, how he who is God blessed above all things, is totally submerged in the waters of suffering from the sole of the foot to the top of the head. In order that he might draw you out totally from these sufferings, the waters have come up to his soul." And as we walk into Holy Week together, I invite you to linger at the cross of Jesus, to acknowledge and name your deep sorrows and hurts and disappointments and questions and betrayals, and allow the co-suffering Jesus to bear them with you and for you.

And I also invite you to hear this word of hope: this is not the end. After our Palm Sunday expectations and dreams get washed away, we find ourselves standing on the solid ground of hope, even if it is, as activist Cornel West writes, a "blues-inflicted hope". Jesus *is* Messiah, Savior, and Liberator, and he doesn't just share our suffering; he transforms our stories into something new, infusing them with life and grace and redemption. We rise. We reimagine.

Kate Bowler is an author, professor, speaker, and follower of Jesus who was diagnosed with Stage IV cancer as the 35-year-old mother of a toddler, and she's learned to hold onto hope while letting go of expectations. In a 2021 interview, she said, "We can be people of deep hope. That is not the same thing as saying our lives are going to work out. As a person of faith, I believe God is drawing us toward a future that is fundamentally a story of love and the salvation of the world. That's not the same thing as saying that my life in its particularity, in all my hopes and dreams, is going to play out the way I imagined."

We are called to be people of deep, blues-inflicted hope, who reimagine a world beyond death and violence and heartbreak and oppression, and who live our lives in alignment with that world, even when we are walking a hard and unanticipated path – that is prophetic work. We are called to follow and worship the Messiah who entered Jerusalem, righteous and victorious *and* lowly and riding on a donkey, to liberate through self-sacrificing love. And every time we show love in action or extend forgiveness or stand for justice, we work with God to make that world a little more of a reality, believing that the Holy Spirit enlivens our efforts with Jesus' resurrection power.

I want to close with words of hope and worship from Paul, another follower of Jesus who reimagined everything he thought he knew in the light of the crucified and resurrected Messiah, from his letter to the Ephesians: "Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen." (Ephesians 3:20-21) Hosanna, Jesus. Save us now.