

“Short of Expectations,” 28 March 2010 (Palm Sunday)

The Bible story we have this morning is the story that begins the last week of the life of Jesus. The church refers to today as Palm Sunday, and it commemorates the entry of Jesus into the city of Jerusalem. The story is told in all four Gospels, with just some slight variations. Jesus seems to have made some preparations ahead of time, because there appears to be some pre-arranged agreement on securing the animal that he wanted to ride into the city. He may have sent an advance team to make sure all the arrangements were in place, much like a political candidate sends a team ahead to make sure all details of an appearance are covered.

The story tells us that crowds of people greeted him, with the disciples leading the way. We can assume the city was packed with people because this was the Passover time, and ostensibly why Jesus was coming into the city—to celebrate the Passover there as faithful Jews were to do. However, it appears that not everyone expected him, nor knew who he was, because the story says, **“As he made his entrance into Jerusalem, the whole city was shaken. Unnerved, people were asking, “What’s going on here? Who is this?”**

Clearly the authorities knew about him, because he had been gathering crowds for a few years now, and word about him had spread. Both the Roman rulers and the religious types were quite suspicious of him, so in some ways, it’s a little surprising that he chose to come into the city so boldly. It’s a bit “in your face,” as the crowds greet him with cheers of “Hosanna!”—the cry to God to save us now! Friend and foe alike had some expectations of the man as he came into the city during this holiest of times.

That’s a lot like us, I think. Don’t we have expectations of the people who are part of our lives? Most of us have certain things that we expect from those who profess to love us, and we have expectations of the company we work for and the people we work

with. We have certain expectations of our schools and our teachers and the results they will achieve, and we have expectations of our government and our corporations and businesses.

While those expectations are all different, the reality is that, for most of us, the results usually fall far short of what we expect and hope for. The partner who promised to stay by our side for the rest of our lives leaves us; the company we worked for downsizes and we’re left floundering. Whenever our hopes are dashed and fall short of our expectations, we’re disappointed at best, and at worst, devastated. What do we do when life disappoints us? What do we do when things don’t turn out quite the way we planned?

That certainly is part of what the disciples were going to learn in the week that lay ahead of them. Upon coming into Jerusalem, I can imagine that they felt they were on top of the world, that nothing could stop them....they were on a roll. Yet by the end of the week, everything will have turned upside down—one of the 12 betraying Jesus, their leader under arrest, they themselves in danger. Things would turn out to be not quite what they had expected and hoped for.

Rabbi Harold Kushner has written a book about this very thing. It’s entitled, *Overcoming Life’s Disappointments*. At one point in the book, he talks about the inevitability of being disappointed in one way or another by life. He writes, **“Every disappointment, every rejection, every dream that doesn’t come true leaves a wound in a person’s soul. Major setbacks—divorce, bereavement, infertility, crippling illness, losing your job—leave permanent scars.”** He goes on to talk about what he calls “small disappointments,” like not getting a promotion or not winning the game, and how they also leave us wounded, but to a lesser degree. Then he says, **“The question is not, Can I get through life without some failures and rejections? Because you can’t, and the more you aspire to in your life, the more you yearn for, the more scars you will accumulate along the way. The real question is, How will**

you respond to those disappointments? Will you respond with bitterness, envy and self-doubt, or with resilience and wisdom?”

So, for the disciples, for us, it becomes a matter of not *if* life is going to disappoint us, but *when*. How are we going to respond when life doesn't happen the way we anticipate? I would guess that most of us in this room today could reflect back over our lives, no matter our age or stage, and can readily see that we are where we are now not necessarily because we planned very carefully and faithfully executed our plan, but because life has made various twists and turns and has wound up depositing us where we find ourselves at the present moment. That's certainly true for me, and my guess is that it's probably true for many of us.

That means that we've already had our fair share of disappointments and unrealized dreams, and that, in one way or another, life hasn't quite turned out the way we expected. How have we gotten past those disappointments, or have we not?

A book I read years ago, and have mentioned several times before, made a big impact on me when it comes to handling all that life brings us. It was written by Victor Frenkl after his experience in a Nazi death camp, and it's entitled *Man's Search for Meaning*. Talk about the millions of people for whom life didn't turn out the way they expected! This was the ultimate expression of life at its worst!

But Frenkl, who survived the death camp, wrote about what he learned and observed there, and the main point he made was this: **What happens to you, no matter how hurtful or unfair, is ultimately less important than what you do about what happens to you.** That, to me, is a profound truth that applies to all of us—we get to choose how we will respond to life's difficulties and disappointments—we can collapse in a heap on the floor, wailing about the unfairness of it all, or we can stand up and start over again. We can whine about all the wrongs that have befallen us and play the victim, or we can use that experience to learn

and resolve to respond to future events differently.

We can wallow in a pool of self-pity, or we can begin to recognize the common bond we share with others who have experienced similar losses, and develop a deeper compassion and understanding. Instead of bemoaning the fact that we haven't found someone who loves us, we can find people on whom we can shower love. We have to choose. We can become stronger in the wake of disappointment, or we can give up and let go of life. It all depends on us and how we choose to respond.

In Deuteronomy, God offers us a choice as to how we are to live. We have the choice to choose life or death, and God urges us to choose life. Furthermore, not only does God want us to choose life, but God gives us what we need to deal with life as it comes to us. I believe God has planted within each of us the seeds of resilience—the power to stand up again after we've been knocked down, the ability to start over when everything we hoped for and dreamed of is gone. I believe God can fill us with the energy we need to create a renewed vision of life and to live with courage and hope as we venture down new paths, if we open our minds and hearts and spirits to receive what God is offering.

Jesus and the disciples were headed into a week filled with unpredictability, not really knowing all that would unfold in their world, and yet they stepped into the city with courage, willing to face whatever lay ahead. Even when things didn't turn out as they hoped, they found the strength to recover and once again to live their lives with conviction and faith. If they could do that, given all the experiences of the last week of life as they had known it, I believe you and I can, too, and I know God is with us—no matter what we face, giving us the strength and courage to keep going.