

# ***Thank God Jesus Does Not Meet Our Expectations***

John 12:12-19

**Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ April 2, 2023 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church**



<sup>12</sup> The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. <sup>13</sup> So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting,

**‘Hosanna!  
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—  
the King of Israel!’**

<sup>14</sup> Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written:

**<sup>15</sup> ‘Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.  
Look, your king is coming,  
sitting on a donkey’s colt!’**

<sup>16</sup> His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. <sup>17</sup> So the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify. <sup>18</sup> It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. <sup>19</sup> The Pharisees then said to one another, ‘You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!’ (John 12:12-19, NRSV)



Hosanna! Hosanna! That’s what the crowds shouted to Jesus when he entered Jerusalem on that Sunday. Do you know what the word means? It sounds like a cry of praise, something like “hallelujah!” It’s not. It’s actually a cry for help, a plea for salvation. It’s a Greek word that most scholars believe is the transliteration of two Hebrew words, “yasha” which means “to save or deliver”, and “anna” which means “beg or beseech”. So literally, “Hosanna!” means “We beg you to save us!”

Some years ago we had a terrible accident on a youth ski trip I was leading. I won’t go into details, but I will tell you that as knelt beside the lifeless body of this young girl as the medics worked to revive her, the only word that would come out of my mouth was “Jesus!” I prayed his name over and over again. Essentially, that’s “Hosanna!” It’s that place in life where you realize you

are utterly helpless, that if the Lord does not intervene the consequences will be too terrible to imagine. On that day, the Lord did intervene in miraculous ways. I’ll tell you the story some other day.

We all know this prayer, though we don’t often use the word “Hosanna!” to express it. When we heard the news of the school shooting in Nashville this past week many of us found ourselves crying out yet again, “Hosanna! We beg you to save us! Come and make things right!” I’m reading a book now about the Bataan Death March in World War II. 76,000 prisoners of war were forced by the Japanese military to march 66 miles to their concentration camp. Many never made it. What’s so striking to me about what I’m reading is that the horrors of war are unchanged in our day. As we see images of the atrocities committed in the war in Ukraine we cry out “Hosanna! We beg you to save us.”

Sometimes the desperation is closer to home. In fact, I’m guessing that most all of you are here this morning because at some point you came to realize in your life that you needed help, that you were stuck. Some of you face grief and sadness that so easily and often overwhelms. Others of us face daily discouragement, even depression. Some of you have come to the end of your rope because there is some destructive part of your life you simply cannot change – some addiction, some unforgiveness or resentment, some fear you just can’t shake. And we cry “Hosanna! We beg you Lord to save us!” “Hosanna!” represents what may be the deepest human prayer we offer to God. Sometimes so deep we don’t even have the words to pray it. “Hosanna!” is all we can cry out. “Jesus!” is all we can manage to pray.

That was the cry on the lips of the people that Sunday when Jesus made his way into Jerusalem. “We beg you, Jesus, to save us!” The crowds were massive that day. It was the week leading up to the feast of Passover, one of the most sacred holy days in Israel. It has always been the dream of every Jew to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem, the holy city. Even today when Jews in foreign lands celebrate Passover, they say, “This year here; next year in Jerusalem.” About 40,000 people lived in Jerusalem in those days. But scholars estimate that at Passover the population swelled to as high as 250,000 people. There are about 2.5 million people in the greater Sacramento area. Imagine an event that

boosted that number to 15 million! That would be the equivalent increase. It was a massive crowd!

Remember that Israel in those days lived under Roman occupation. And to the Jews, the fact that this arrangement would continue was inconceivable. We are God's chosen people! How could God allow us to be subjected by pagan enemies? It was not possible. And so every Jew in those days was waiting and watching for the Messiah, a Jewish word that literally means "anointed one". In Greek the word is "Christ". They all knew that the prophets had declared long ago that one day an heir to David's throne would come to rescue Israel. It was only a matter of time.

The celebration of Passover only heightened these messianic expectations. As you probably know, this was a feast to remember the time God answered their "Hosanna!" prayers and delivered them from slavery in Egypt through the hand of Moses. In those days God came in power, with plagues, and parting seas, and death to enemies. God delivered us then. He certainly could – and would! – deliver us again.

Add to all this heightened expectation the fact that just days earlier, in a village called Bethany just outside of Jerusalem, a man named Lazarus who had been rotting in the tomb for four days was raised from the dead. This didn't happen in private, but in broad daylight. It was Jesus, the rabbi from Nazareth, who made this happen. The same Jesus who had been walking all over Palestine for three years healing the sick, giving sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf, healing lepers and paralytics, and teaching with the sort of power and authority that was unheard of in those days. These are the sorts of things the prophets said would characterize the Messiah. People had asked Jesus to his face if he was the one they all were waiting for. He never denied it. And though his answers were often elusive, there were times when he seemed to hint that he was.

So when word gets out that Jesus is on his way into the city, things become frenzied. A crowd is walking in with him, his disciples along with many, many others from Bethany who cannot deny that a man who raises people from the dead is as strong a candidate to save Israel as anybody. Another huge crowd apparently goes out from the city to meet him, all these people who have heard the stories, maybe even witnessed the miracles and teaching firsthand, and are exploding with anticipation of his arrival. Understand it was a very volatile situation when these two crowds met. The Romans must have been on high alert. And the Jewish leadership was not pleased because the Romans were

not pleased. They were, in fact, trying to find both Jesus and Lazarus to take them out and squash the dangerous and growing fervor.

All four Gospel writers record what happens next. Along with the others, John tells us that the crowds go out shouting to Jesus, "Hosanna! Hosanna! We beg you to save us!" They are placing all their hopes that this man is the Messiah., and John gives us two clues here that make clear exactly what kind of Messiah they hope Jesus will be for them.

The first clue is their use of palms. It seems innocent enough to us, right? Even innocuous. Palm branches are beautiful. Certainly they must have been abundant in that part of the world. How lovely it is that people cut them down and then waved them like giant fans as the parade passed by. What could be more peaceful than waving palm branches?

Lots of things, actually. You see, in those days palm branches carried powerful patriotic symbolism. Less than 200 years before this time, a Jewish guerrilla leader named Judas Maccabeus led a successful uprising against a pagan invading force. When Judas then reestablished Jerusalem under Jewish control and cleansed the temple, his followers carried palm branches as they entered the city for the celebration of military victory. 1 Maccabees 13:51 declares, "On the twenty-third day of the second month, in the one hundred and seventy-first year, the Jews entered it 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."

During both major wars that Israel had with Rome, images of palms were stamped on the coins which were minted by the rebels. The palm, in other words, symbolized Israel's national hope.<sup>1</sup> To get a sense of this, imagine a parade for our current president, Joe Biden. And the crowd along the parade route all waving red MAGA hats. Understanding the context, you and I would never imagine that those people were just tipping their hats out of respect for the president. No Roman citizen who was present that day saw those waving palms and imagined that these were symbols of peace.

The second clue John gives us is the scripture quoted by the crowds. Misquoted, actually. John tells us that the crowds yell out, "**Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the king of Israel!**" They were, of course, citing Psalm 118, a psalm that

<sup>1</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Eerdmans Publishing, 2012), 709.

was loaded with connections that were bound up in the minds of the people. I encourage you to read the whole thing later today. It's a psalm of praise and thanksgiving, expressed to God for his goodness and deliverance. But by the time of Jesus, it was sung and prayed as a messianic psalm, a cry for God to come and conquer once again. It's not surprising, therefore, that this is the psalm the crowds choose that day.

What is surprising is how they misquote it. Verse 26 reads, **"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. From the house of the Lord we bless you."**<sup>2</sup> Notice what's missing? The crowds add the line, **"Blessed is the king of Israel!"** No such line appears in the psalm. It's not the first or the last time people have twisted the scriptures to fit their own agenda. The psalm itself does praise the Lord as one who saves and delivers his people. But it speaks of this Messiah as one who is **"The stone the builders rejected."** But that's not what the crowd cries out: "Blessed is the stone the builders rejected!" They do not want a Messiah who is rejected, but a Messiah who is victorious and exalted, a warrior, a mighty king who disposes of his enemies.

All this ought to give us pause. We know who Jesus is and why he is coming into Jerusalem that day. He *is* the Messiah, God's anointed one, the heir of David's throne. And he is indeed coming to bring salvation, to do what all the prophets before him declared that he would one day do. And yet there could not be a greater disparity between what Jesus was coming to do, and what the crowds *expected* he was coming to do. This is what ought to give us pause, because I'm not sure all of us have learned our lesson here.

How many of us in this room right now have been disappointed at one time or another because Jesus failed to meet our expectations? If we're honest, some of us are disappointed with Jesus right now. We too have heard the stories, stories of healing and restoration. We have heard his promises, promises of peace and justice. He have heard the teaching – bold teaching – that declares the coming of heaven to earth, all things made right again. And maybe you have heard of ways Jesus has miraculously responded to the "Hosanna!" cries of others, and have wondered why he has not responded in similar ways in your life. Maybe you gave your life to following Jesus some years ago, and you imagined that by this time things in your life would have become a whole lot easier than they actually are. Maybe you look around at our city, or even our nation or our world, and wonder why violence, and division, and war, and poverty continue seemingly unabated. Do you know what it's like to be disappointed with Jesus

because he has failed to meet your expectations? When we get to this place, either one of two things has happened. Either our expectations are unrealistic, or Jesus truly has failed to come through like he promised that he would.

If you know the story, as many of you do, the palm-waving crowds that day were about to be sorely disappointed with Jesus. And they should have seen it coming if they were paying attention. He gave them plenty of notice. He was about to give them more. The order of events that John records here is not haphazard. Notice when it is that Jesus decides he'd rather not walk in this parade. It's after he sees the palms, after he hears the crowds adding words to Psalm 118, after their expectations become clear to him, that's when he hitches a ride on the back of a donkey. He was sending a message to the crowds. Since the ruckus they were making likely made it impossible for him to use words, he chose a symbol that was worth a thousand words.

Don't misunderstand, in those days a donkey was a noble animal. When King David wanted to present his son, Solomon, as the future king, he has him ride into town on the back of a donkey.<sup>3</sup> Here's the important distinction though. When a king rode into town on the back of a horse, it was a symbol that he was bent on war. When he came in on the back of a donkey, however, he was coming in peace. From everything the crowds were doing and saying its clear that they expected Jesus to come riding in on a horse. We can only imagine what they thought when instead they saw him climb up onto the back of a donkey.

But again, they should have seen it coming. The prophet, Zechariah, centuries before had told Israel this would happen. John reminds us of his prophesy in his account.

**Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!  
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!  
Lo, your king comes to you;  
triumphant and victorious is he,  
humble and riding on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.<sup>4</sup>**

It certainly was a humble act. And yet, not in the sense that Jesus was saying to the crowds, "Listen, quiet down. I am not worthy of such worship and adoration." No, if that was his aim he would have quieted the crowds or refused to participate in their parade. When he gets on that donkey he comes out of the messiah closet and let's people worship him. It's a bold move, especially on that day, in that place, with those people

<sup>2</sup> This and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

<sup>3</sup> See 1<sup>st</sup> Kings 1:33

<sup>4</sup> Zechariah 9:9

watching. Jesus is actively and intentionally fulfilling the messianic prophecies of Zechariah and others. The people should rejoice and shout. He is their king. He is coming to triumph and declare victory. It's just that he's not coming to do it the way they expected, not even in the slightest. He is a king, but he is a crucified king. He is the Messiah, but he is a suffering Messiah.

In our day we don't wave palms. Instead, we wave flags. In our context, the stars and stripes represents our national hopes in the way the palm branch did for ancient Israel. People of other nations wave flags of other colors and symbols for the same reason. And there is nothing wrong with patriotism. Where we let it cross the line is when we join it to the cause of Christ. And let's face it, how prevalent is it these days to see the church do this, especially in America!

The Jews were stuck in the idea that the Messiah was coming only for them. But this had never been God's intention, even at the beginning. When God first chose Abraham and his family, established them as his chosen people, he made it abundantly clear that he was blessing them so that in time all nations of the world would be blessed through them.<sup>5</sup> But many Jews forgot this. We can forget it as well. Jesus did not come to save and bless America, or at least America alone, or America more than other nations. It's why we don't have the American flag present in our space of worship, but always kept outside the door. Not because we aren't called to love and serve our nation, or even to patriotism. Of course we are. But if we bring the American flag into the sanctuary we have to bring the flags of all nations into the sanctuary because Christ came as the Savior to all people of all tribes and nations. That actually would be a beautiful sight, the flags of all nations that might serve as palms we could wave in anticipation of Christ's coming!

But it's not just our nationalistic expectations that can become misguided. In my own life, I must confess that when I have been disappointed with Jesus it has because I have expected him to come and do things he actually never promised to do. If you think about it, you might realize it's the same with you. I expect Jesus to bring immediate healing or comfort to me or somebody I love. He often doesn't. But did he ever promise he would? I expect Jesus to give me clear guidance and direction when I come to an important crossroads in life. He often doesn't, at least on my timetable. But when did he ever assure us that he would? Has my life been easier since I started to sincerely follow after Jesus? Not really. In some ways it's been more difficult. But didn't he promise me that is exactly what would happen? And so it's fair to ask yourself, are my disappointments with

Jesus because of unmet expectations more about his failure to follow through, or more about my failure to understand what he has promised all along?

Here's a question. Why was Jesus coming into Jerusalem that day? What was his mission? Before this week I would have answered that question by saying that his mission was the cross, that he came to die. But that's not quite right. If his mission was simply to die, none of us would be here right now. We certainly wouldn't be here next Sunday! His ultimate mission was to rise from the dead, right? Resurrection was the goal, not just for him, but for us, along with new creation for the whole world. But you can't be raised from the dead before you first die. The only way to Easter Sunday was through Good Friday. In other words, the way to glory is always through suffering, specifically through the giving up of one's life out of love for the sake of others. This is not only the way of Jesus, it is the way of those who follow after Jesus.

It's telling that John points out that even Jesus' disciples had no clue about any of this that day. He tells us in verse 16 that it was only later after Jesus was resurrected, and after he ascended into heaven, that they began to finally understand, probably because the Holy Spirit had come at that point to shed a light on things. The disciples weren't alone. Earlier this week a lot of us read that account in Matthew 11 where John the Baptist, of all people, admits that Jesus isn't meeting his expectations. The man who first declared that Jesus was the Messiah sends a message to Jesus, asking, "**Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?**" Things simply were not playing out as John expected they would.

Most of you know that the crowd that surged around Jesus that day full of messianic expectations was totally thinned out five days later when Jesus marches through town carrying a cross rather than riding on a donkey. I supposed they weren't thinned out as much as they were disillusioned. Clearly, Jesus was not going to meet their expectations. He was not going to answer their cry for help as they hoped he would. So now instead of "Hosanna!", they cried out, "Crucify him!".

Their disillusionment did not stop Jesus. He had not come to meet their expectations. He came to far exceed them.

You see, we expect Jesus to come and make our own nation great again. He comes instead to invite all people of all nations and tribes to a whole new citizenship in a kingdom where not only something as fleeting as nationalistic pride is restored, but peace and

<sup>5</sup> See Genesis 12:1-3

flourishing for all who come for all of time. We expect Jesus to show us how we can save ourselves by lifting ourselves up and restoring our lives. He comes instead to teach us that it is through giving our lives away that we truly find life. We expect Jesus to come and take away temporary pain and hardship that we might live comfortable and respectable lives. He comes instead to help us learn that it is ultimately through suffering and rejection that we are stripped of all false identities and find our one true identity as eternally beloved sons and daughters of God.

I can't help but think of how C.S. Lewis put it in his masterful sermon, "The Weight of Glory",

It would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.<sup>6</sup>

Here's how the scriptures put it in Ephesians 3:20-21, **"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, for ever and ever. Amen."**

Hosanna! It is the natural and heartfelt desperate cry of every one of us. Help us, Lord! We beg you to save us! Thankfully, God does not ignore our cry. He never does. He comes to save us, riding on a donkey, bending beneath the whip, receiving nails into his body, going cold into a tomb, all to save us. And then he rises from the grave and opens the way into life for all who would follow after him. Let us therefore never make the mistake of others by expecting from Jesus so far less than he came to bring. He has already done for us infinitely more than any of us ever would have expected. And he has only just begun.

Amen.



## The Next Step

### *A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application*

1. Read the passage from John 12:12-19 again. It's a familiar story to many of us. Pay attention to what you notice this time through. What stands out to you?
2. Do you know what it is like to cry out "Hosanna!" (i.e. "Lord, we beg you to save us!")? When have you done so in your life recently?
3. What does it mean to you that Jesus comes riding into town on a donkey?
4. Does Jesus want the crowds to worship him here or not?
5. In what way has Jesus failed to meet your expectations? Where has the disconnect been, his lack of follow-through or your misinformed expectations?
6. Consider the misinformed expectations the crowds in Jerusalem had that day from Jesus as Messiah. How might the expectations of the church in our day, or the church in America specifically, have similar misinformed expectations?
7. Paul makes this claim in Ephesians 3:20-21: **"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, for ever and ever. Amen."** Do you believe this to be true? How can you be sure?

#### Table to Table Question

#### *A question for kids and adults to answer together*

Why does Jesus come riding into town on the back of a donkey? What is he trying to teach us here?

<sup>6</sup> Preached originally as a sermon in the Church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford, on June 8, 1942. Published in THEOLOGY, November, 1941,

and by the S.P.C.K, 1942. Read the full sermon here: <https://www.wheelersburg.net/Downloads/Lewis%20Glory.pdf>