

# The Unexpected Jesus: Not Your Ordinary King

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The Community Church of Sebastopol  
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## Mark 11:1-11

Lucy is reading Linus a story, the familiar story of King Midas: “And so the King was granted his wish. Everything he touched would turn to gold. Now the next day...” “Stop!” says Linus. “You don’t have to read any further. I know just what’s going to happen. These things always have a way of backfiring.”

I wonder if the same could be said of our Palm Sunday celebration. Things get off to such a great start – the tree branches, the cheering crowd, the parade. Nothing can stop us now! But, as Linus reminds us, even seemingly good things seem to have a way of backfiring. He sounds a lot like my Norwegian relatives: “Oh yeah, today’s okay, but don’t know what tomorrow might bring.” Certainly the events of Holy Week would seem to prove him right. Sunday, it is cheering and celebration. By Friday, Jesus is a humiliated king, hung on a cross. How could such a thing have happened? What went so terribly wrong?

When you think about it, it seems to make no sense... for us and certainly for people outside the faith. In so many ways, the story we tell is a beautiful and comforting story. We speak of this man, Jesus, who was caring and kind, a blessing to all he met, no matter who they were. He welcomed even the outcast, the stranger, the least of these. Who wouldn’t love and want to follow someone like that? And so a non-church friend says, “Great story. Great man. Whatever became of him?” And then we have to say, “Well, actually, he was arrested, sentenced to die, and executed as an enemy of the state.” Kind of makes the Palm Sunday “Hosannas” stick in your throat. How do we so quickly get from shouts of “Hosanna!” to shouts of “crucify him!”

I may have mentioned the name, Robert Alston, to you a while back. He was from Atlanta and, a number of years ago, was a member of the Georgia legislature. There was much about the legislature and its procedures he did not like, but one practice in particular offended him, a practice he was determined to change. It was the custom in Georgia, and perhaps other states as well, for wealthy and influential people to use state prisoners to work on their homes, to build their commercial buildings or to farm their plantations. All they had to do was provide lunch. The hours of labor were free. Not a single prisoner was paid. That was a lot of wealth being made on the backs of prisoners.

Alston found this practice to be morally offensive. “It’s worse than slavery,” he said. But his fellow legislators, many of whom benefited from this practice, were unresponsive to his concerns. He was urged to back off, not rock the boat, who cares about a few prisoners anyway? But he refused to back down. Finally he announced, “Tomorrow I will introduce a bill into the legislature that will make this inhumane and unjust practice illegal in the state of Georgia.”

The next morning he came in with his proposed bill. A fellow legislator came over to Alston and asked, “Are you still going to introduce your bill?” “Yes, I am,” he replied. Whereupon the man reached inside his coat, pulled out a gun, and murdered Robert Alston. Robert Alston... killed because he refused to back down from what he believed. Robert Alston... even in the face of threats against his life, refusing to stop being who he was.

His story leads me to wonder... did things really go shockingly bad for Jesus after Palm Sunday. Or, given who he was and what he believed, did events unfold in the only way they possibly could have?

A Fred Craddock story: “I was the guest preacher at a church in Louisville. As the service was beginning, the minister told me, ‘Now you go on in with the choir and I will join you up there.’ I thought he was going to have a prayer at the back, but he just disappeared. The service began, things were going along and I was wondering where he was, when a side window opened. The minister crawled in through the window. He came, and sat there with me through the rest of the service, and acted like a fairly decent human being. I had to ask him later, ‘Why did you do that?’

“He said, ‘Well, everybody just sits there so bored. I thought I would give them a little something extra.’”

Could that be a description of Palm Sunday? Certainly Jesus is doing something far more serious and significant than crawling in through a side window, but I wonder, could he be giving us a little

something extra – a little something no one expected and no one saw coming? Perhaps even something we aren't sure we want.

Let's briefly think about expectations. Jesus comes into town and the people shout, "Hosanna" which means "God Saves," or better yet, "Save Us!" Save us from what? How about from Rome, from political oppression, from lives of poverty, hunger, sickness and death – which was the life the vast majority of people in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine lived. "Jesus, save us now. Be the Messiah we expect, the Messiah we want and need and have long awaited. No time like the present." It was believed that the Messiah would come as a mighty warrior, throw out the Romans, establish God's Kingdom on earth once and for all – kick a few back sides and take names, a car in every garage, a chicken in every pot! How do you suppose Jesus, on that donkey, measured up to such lofty hopes and expectations? The events of Good Friday pretty much tell us all we need to know. It occurs to me that Palm Sunday is always a good day for us to step back and consider just what we want from Jesus... what are our expectations?

You see, on Palm Sunday, Jesus brings to Jerusalem what he brought everywhere he went: peace and truth and disarming love. He brings a passion for compassion, for justice, for reconciliation, even for loving our enemy. He knew all about people's messianic expectations, but much like Robert Alston in Georgia, he refused to stop being who he was, refused to stop teaching and preaching and living out his vision of the Kingdom of God, even when that path proved less than popular, even when it meant that people's grand expectations were not met by his peculiar presence, even when it led to a cross. I think of a Christmas poem by George McDonald; "We were all searching for a king to slay our foes and lift us high, thou camest a little baby thing, to make a woman cry." Or in the words of William Willimon, "Jesus did not come to meet our expectations of what a king should be like. He came to meet our deepest needs – our need for a means to God that is not self-devised, our need for a salvation that is more than a political solution, our need for the truth about who God really is rather than who we hoped God would be. Jesus came to bring us peace we could not have on our own"

One might say that Palm Sunday was the day when both the disciples and the crowd had their expectations destroyed by Jesus. But how about us? Again, is this the sort of king, messiah, savior we expect... that we even want? These many centuries later we still seem to think that military solutions to our world problems are the only realistic solutions. We tend to think of political or economic power as the only power worth having, the only power that really means anything. We say, "Look this is the way the world works. Get used to it." Or we say, "This is reality, all there is, all that will ever be, so learn to live with it." But then we find ourselves face-to-face with this peculiar king on a donkey who insists that it ain't necessarily so. We meet one who believes so passionately that there is another way for us and our world that he quite literally bets his life on it.

In the words of theologian, Rebecca Chopp, "On Palm Sunday, a window opens, quickly, for us to see something higher, better and more beautiful than the troubled ways of this world... The Palm Sunday story names something about our journey of faith: it says that amid struggle, anguish, denial and forgetfulness, we have a wild and soaring anticipation, a vision of a new way, a glimpse of a new world."

No doubt about it. By the time the sun goes down on Palm Sunday, the shadow of the cross is already falling across Jesus' path. What we see is that when you stay true to yourself, true to your passion and call, when you get involved in the lives of other people and the life of our broken and hurting world, it can be risky, it can require most if not all of us, it might involve sacrifice. To follow the path of Jesus does not necessarily mean that everything will be peaceful and prosperous and pleasurable for us. He never calls us to worldly success; he calls us to faithfulness, invites us to join him in changing the way we do business around here.

Yes, on Palm Sunday something new and unexpected rides in among us. And certainly we can choose to turn away from it, deny it, get rid of it. God knows it wouldn't be the first time. Or we can take the risk of opening a window in our hearts through which this unexpected Jesus can climb in. We can allow our longings to give rise to new worlds of anticipation, our imaginations to birth new images of human hope and godly grace. We can allow his life, as challenging, and yes, at times as maddening as it is, to touch our lives, his view of reality to alter our view of reality and of what is possible. Today a side window opens and a whole new world comes parading in. Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord.