

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Watertown, WI**

**“Great Expectations”**

Rev. David K. Groth

Palm Sunday, 2022

John 12:12-19

It’s always disappointing when the reality doesn’t live up to your expectations. America’s Test Kitchen makes a recipe look so good on television, especially when they spoon the sauce up close and in slow motion. They take the first bite; they close their eyes and ooh and aah, almost like there’s a circus going on in their mouths. I’ve recreated some of those recipes, using good ingredients and following the directions precisely. I even spoon the sauce on in slow motion. But when I taste the Groth version, it’s sort of like, “Huh. It’s ok, but there’s no circus going on.” When the reality just doesn’t live up to the expectations, it’s disappointing for sure. Sometimes it can be heartbreaking.

That first Holy Week, the highest expectations of Palm Sunday were shattered by the harshest realities of Good Friday. The expectation is that Jesus would take hold of political power, become king, and throw out the Roman occupiers, ushering in peace and prosperity. But the reality was He would be charged with sedition and executed. Quite a gap between the expectations and reality!

The empire had a firm grip on Judah and Jerusalem. It was more like a choke hold. Historians talk about the *Pax Romana* – a long period of relative peace in the Roman Empire. But on the ground in Judah, it didn’t really feel like peace. It was more like an absence of war assured by brute, overwhelming and oppressive force.

The Romans used parades to demonstrate their military might over conquered peoples. They regularly marched their soldiers through the streets of the major cities in lands they occupied. In Jerusalem, Pontius Pilate would do that during Passover Week to demonstrate the strength of Roman rule over the Jews. Remember, Passover was sort of like a Jewish independence celebration, but Pilate wanted to make certain the Jews would not be entertaining such ideas of independence, at least not on his watch. Mounted on a magnificent white stallion, Pilate paraded hundreds of Roman soldiers right through the center of the city. Some units were mounted on horseback, others marched to the cadence of drums. Each soldier would be clad in leather armor polished to a high gloss. On each soldier’s head, helmets would gleam in the bright sunlight. At their sides, sheathed in their scabbards, were swords crafted from the hardest steel; in their hands, each soldier would carry a spear. Or if he was an archer, he carried a bow with a sling of arrows across his back. In equipment and training and men, Jewish rebels looked nothing like that. The message was you’d best think twice before entertaining dreams of independence.

And if one *was* caught in an act of treason or rebellion, they were tortured and executed. Rome’s preferred method was crucifixion, making sure their victims stayed alive on the cross as long as possible. Historians say the Roman Empire crucified thousands over the years. So, it was a common sight to see people dying on crosses outside of Jerusalem. That’s what *Pax Romana* looked and felt like to many.

The parade of Jesus going through Jerusalem could not have been more different. The gate the Roman army had used to exit the city is the gate Jesus used to enter it. Rather than sitting high on a huge white stallion leading part of the most powerful military force on earth, the Son of God was seated without saddle on a small donkey. Rather than an army marching behind him there were families crowding around, women and children. Yet, the Jewish crowd was hopeful. “Hosanna!” they shouted, which means “save us now!” And “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!” (v. 13). What gives them the idea that Jesus would come as warrior king to overthrow the Romans?

Well, they knew the prophecies of the Old Testament said the Messiah would come and lead God’s people out of bondage and oppression. They assumed that meant political bondage and oppression. But John

also tells us this crowd is composed of those who had witnessed or heard of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. That's a game changer. If He can do that, maybe that's a sign He is a Messiah, and maybe that means He has untold powers that would make Roman armies look like toy soldiers. If he can say "Quiet! Be still!" to the raging seas, maybe He can do the same to tyrants and autocrats. If He can feed thousands, maybe He can feed and supply thousands of Jewish rebels. If He can heal diseases of every sort simply by speaking the word, maybe he can heal battlefield injuries too. If he can make a lame man walk, maybe he can make the Romans run. If he can drive out demons, maybe he can drive out Pilate and his men and replace the *Pax Romana* with Jewish peace.

Even the disciples were attracted to these dreams. Remember when James and John sauntered up to Jesus and asked, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and the other at your left, when you come into your glory." They're thinking earthly kingdom here. They're thinking power and prestige.

And when Jesus spoke plainly about weakness and humility and death, on a cross no less, the disciples could not even hear it. "Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, 'Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you'" (Mt. 16).

So, as He enters Jerusalem, the crowd is all stirred up and of one mind: Now is the time for Jesus to become King! Now is the time for Jesus to stir up Jewish power and send the Romans back from whence they came. Jewish peace through King Jesus! That's what the crowds wanted. That's what the disciples wanted. Jewish peace brought on and maintained by brute force, overwhelming force. It's the Jewish version of what Rome was already doing, but it's not at all what Jesus has in mind.

What happens next? Jesus starts teaching again. (How disappointing to the people who were expecting more.) Then, on the evening of Thursday, he is arrested and bound. On Good Friday, he is beaten, abused, mocked, flogged, accused of sedition, tried in a kangaroo court, and finally crucified. In the greatest way possible, the reality fell short of the expectations.

Jesus did not leave the kingdom of heaven just to establish some earthly kingdom. And Jesus did not come to save us using raw, brute power. He came to save us using weakness, suffering, and death.

In our Epistle lesson, Paul writes, "Though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." He emptied himself and became as frail and vulnerable and humble as an infant in a manger. Instead of ruthlessly crushing his opponents, Jesus subjected himself to the wrath and ruthlessness of his opponents.

For us who want to be invincible, God emptied himself and became defenseless. For us who want all the freedoms the world has to offer, God became bound and then nailed to wood. For us who never want to have to serve or be subject to anyone, God became our Suffering Servant. On the cross, He who was strong became weak. He who is our Mighty Fortress became defenseless, exposed, splayed out, vulnerable to the elements, to the spittle, to the gawking of those passing by, to the probe of a spear. God's Son died so that you and I might live eternally.

[Confirmands], that's the one you want to follow all your days. Not the one who lusts for power, but the One who gave it up for you. Not the one who wants to lord it over you and push you around, bully you through life, but the One who wants to serve you. Not the one who will say anything to be elected, but the One who said things that people still don't want to hear. Not those who think we're all here to serve them, but the One who wishes to serve you and forgive you and save you. Not the one who will ignore or break the laws or change them to serve himself, but the One who, as Paul wrote, "was born under the law to redeem those under the law" (Gal. 4:4). You want to follow the One who lives and reigns today, not as a tyrant, but as your loving Father. You want to follow the One who loves you *more* than power.

That One is Jesus Christ, and Him crucified, for you. You've been baptized into His death and resurrection. You've been taught the faith. He forgives you. He will shepherd you throughout your lives. He loves you. He will bring you home to be with Him in Heaven. Thanks be to God.