

Mark 11:1-11

Intro March 16, 2008 Conflicting Expectations

Upon entering a little country store, a stranger noticed a sign reading, "Danger! Beware of Dog" posted on the glass door. Concerned for his safety, but wanting to pick up a few items, he peered inside, and there laid a harmless old hound dog asleep on the floor besides the cash register. He strolled in and asked the owner, "Is that the dog folks are supposed to beware of?" "Yep, that's him," he replied.

The stranger couldn't help but be amused. "That certainly doesn't look like a dangerous dog to me. Why in the world would you post that sign?" "Because," the owner replied, "before I posted that sign, people kept tripping over him."

When expectations conflict with reality, we may be amused or angered. With the dog, it is a pleasant surprise to know the sign is for the hound's safety, not yours. We all live with expectations, hopes that shape our lives, making order out of the chaos that surrounds us. We are amused if the consequences of dashed expectations do not hit us too hard. With no serious investment, disappointment is minor when expectations are dashed. The same can be said when we have low expectations of people. Pamela Anderson claimed: "It is great to be a blonde. With low expectations it's very easy to surprise people."

What happens when we we've invested ourselves in our expectations? Rather than a chuckle, we become enraged at the failure of such a person. We are angered if those expectations are dashed.

Take the cultural expectations that shade and color the images of parents-to-be. Ads for baby products show a woman serenely holding her child, looking blissfully and mysteriously contented. When expectations are crushed beneath the weight of reality, that tranquil mother melts down in the middle of the night as cooing gives way to shrieking. When expectations conflict we become embittered or infuriated.

Flip on the TV and parents and kids verbally spar with humorous jabs, so that problems are solved through one-liners in 22 minutes. We know it is a make believe world, but our expectations are shaped to imagine that raising kids should not be nearly so hard. Then reality hits.

Erich Fromm, the philosophic psychoanalyst of the last century aptly commented on the conflict of expectations when he said: "There is hardly any activity, any enterprise, which is started out with such tremendous hopes and expectations, and yet which fails so regularly, as love."

In our relationships we begin with wonderful expectations only to cynical re-evaluate. Yet without a framework to appraise our expectations, we are either left with a Pollyanna determination to sustain our dreams despite all odds or we guard ourselves behind a steel wall of anger and bitterness so as not to be burned again.

There is another option. That is to set aside our agenda-driven expectations to discern what is God's agenda and allow that to guide our expectations.

This same conflict of expectations took place in the days leading up to the cross. In Mark 11 as Jesus enters Jerusalem, the very place where Jesus expected to be betrayed and killed, the conflict of agendas between Jesus and his disciples took place once again. In Mark 11 we see how the disciples and Galilean crowds preparing for Passover expected something out of Jesus that he was not going to offer. There we can see how and where you and I need to allow our expectations be guided by God's agenda. READ Mark 11:1-11.

Before we look at God's agenda, let us see how our expectations are misguided whenever we expect to fulfill our agenda.

OUR EXPECTATIONS ARE MISGUIDED BECAUSE WE EXPECT TO FULFILL OUR AGENDA

Our agenda is one of personal salvation (that is, a salvation that has *me* in the center)

As Jesus and his disciples made their way from Galilee up the hills surrounding Jerusalem, Jesus prepared them for what was ahead. He filled them in on his agenda, yet they could not let go of what they wanted. They were fixated on *their* victory, so that the cross became an appendage, an inconvenient stop along the road to their own deliverance. Their agenda was their salvation.

Like the young groom-to-be may see registration for gifts and picking out bridal bouquets as a temporary trial to get to the good part of marriage, we see the cross as a small bump in the road. Since that illustration may not resonate with the gals, how about labor as a hurdle to a baby?

But each is not really a bump, but an indication of what is to come. Marriage will be filled with numerous decisions and parenting with pain as well as joy. The goal should not be about me. If it is, all we will seek is what will make me happy.

As they near Jerusalem, winding their way up to the city, Jesus instructs them to fetch a colt in a nearby village. Once they retrieve the beast, they prepare the ride by forming a saddle out of their cloaks. Others articles of clothes are strewn on the path. Some festival goers cut leafy branches to cushion the road beneath the donkey's feet. What is happening here and why?

Using a colt is out of order for normal pilgrims, who were expected to enter Jerusalem on their own feet, unless too sick to walk. The presence of the donkey calls attention and causes people to wonder what is the agenda ... so they fill in with their own ideas. Jesus does not explain, but allows the conflicting expectations to stand.

What did they see?

- What the people called to mind the actions a thousand years before, when Jehu, in 2 Kings 9, was anointed king to go and destroy evil king Ahab and Jezebel. As Jehu is anointed the citizens threw down their garments under his feet and proclaimed him king (v13).
- 200 years before Jesus road into Jerusalem, the freedom fighter, Judas Maccabee defeated the evil pagan Antiochus and established a free Jewish nation. As Judas entered Jerusalem to celebrate the reclaiming of the Temple, people cut palm branches, waiving them in celebration. Hanukah is a remembrance of the Maccabean victory and purification of the Temple. The Maccabean government only lasted about 70 years before it fell to the Romans. Freedom and national pride was still on people's minds in Jesus' day. They expected the Messiah to be a bigger, badder version of Judas Maccabee who would throw out Romans, and not just restore independence, but bring a glory like time of King David.
- While Mark does not make the connection for his readers, the other gospel writers understood this to be a prophecy of Zechariah 9, which we read earlier. While the donkey was a symbol of peace and not war, they latched onto the expectations wrapped up in this imagery. The donkey was a royal animal, reserved for a king. That it was never ridden before signified it was for a sacred purpose. Likewise, there is an allusion here to Genesis 49:10-11, as this tethered animal pointed to the Messiah that was to come who would bring justice.

But those expectations missed the significance of the cross. All they see was victory, salvation that benefited them in a very personal way. Their agenda was to be freed from the external tyranny of Rome, to enjoy freedom from occupation. How often do we approach God with the same agenda?

We should embrace Christ in the gospel because the Father's wrath is turned aside because God the Son took our condemnation. Rather we latch onto the benefits (heaven) forgetting the mercy of sins pardoned. In that scenario salvation becomes an improvement of my status, and it should be God's agenda to rid the world of that which oppresses me or hinders my happiness.

If I were to ask you to make a list of the problems you face, that our community faces, our nation and world, what would you list? Where on that list would you find your name?

Rather our greatest need is not salvation from life's trials, but from ourselves, from that agenda we've inserted so that we dare to expect God to answer those needs.

Our agenda is one of personal success

I wonder if the disciples began to wonder if Jesus was wrong about the betrayal, suffering, and death. The crowds seem so jubilant, so receptive. Perhaps Jesus will succeed despite his predictions. They saw no betrayal here, only celebration. He's on God's side, he should expect success!

As pilgrims climb the hill to the Temple, they sang the Hallel Psalms, which include Psalm 118 quoted in 9-10. These words would have been sung regardless of Jesus' arrival, but they take on special meaning as he presents himself. But in this we can see the conflicting expectations.

The psalm calls out for God to save in the word *Hosanna*. It became a rallying cry to which they did added the political desire for David's kingdom to be re-established. Again, they expected salvation from others, focusing on their own success and contentment.

The disciples' hope of victory is one in which they will find success, peace, prosperity brought to them by Jesus' victory. There is no sense of personal accountability of their sinfulness that is the reason for this entry into Jerusalem.

For them, the sin exists in the hard life due to Roman occupation, to the struggles they must endure, struggles that God must rescue them from. We know what will happen as they realize that their agenda for God to save them from pain and misery inflicted on them by others will not come as expected. They will abandon their shallow agenda.

Like the disciples in Jesus' day, we need to be saved from a fluttering faith that abandons Christ at the first sign of suffering. We need to be saved from expectations of glory and success so that we can learn to expect the cross and see there God's glory in a new light, so that we can see Christ dying for us so that we may really live. When speaking of the failures around us, we should address our own the loudest.

We live in an idyllic world, one in which we have created expectations that can never be fulfilled. We are too enthralled with personal advancement to realize that God calls us to discipleship.

We're like young engineer fresh out of MSOE at the job interview, when the HR director asked: "And what starting salary were you looking for?"

The engineer said "I'd settle for \$125,000 a year, depending on the benefits package."

To which the interviewer said, "Well, what would you say to a package of 5-weeks vacation, 14 paid holidays, full medical and dental, company matching retirement fund to 50% of salary, and a company car leased every 2 years--say, a red Corvette?"

The Engineer sat up straight, much energized, "Wow! Are you kidding?"

The interviewer replied, "Yeah, but you started it."

We laugh at the hubris of the young man, but we do this all the time with God, when we set our expectations on a life that is according to our agenda.

Our spouse will succeed in every endeavor, excelling in beauty and income potential. They will be great conversationalists and passionate lovers. They will be hard workers and always available when we need them. Our children will have no ills; our jobs will change at our discretion and with each change we will advance just as we planned. And our church, well, the sermons will convict without offending, the pastor will be young and vibrant with years of experience. There will be no hint of scandal in the pews, but people will be genuine and transparent.

OUR EXPECTATIONS MUST BE GUIDED BY GOD'S AGENDA

God's agenda is guided by God's sovereignty

God's agenda of the cross is clear from the beginning as God is in control. Throughout Mark, Jesus' determination on the way to the cross exists because it is necessary for the Son of Man to suffer. That determination finds its certainty in God's sovereignty that the Father is in control.

Jesus rises to the hill over looking Jerusalem, the Mount of Olives, the very place that Ezekiel tells us from which the glory of God departed. It is here that Zechariah 14:4 tells us that God will come to judge in the last day. Jesus knows the Father's plan, taking comfort in the His design that is good despite the pain.

God's sovereignty is further illustrated as he instructs his disciples what to do next in v2. We may wonder how Jesus knew this colt would be tied up and that the owners comply so easily?

The answer is simple – Jesus' very life is under the sovereign hand of God. When we realize that God's sovereignty produces God's agenda, we can expect events to work out in ways we never would realize, but that they are according to God's plan.

This tidbit that is mentioned in the gospel is here to remind us that in the face of his own suffering, Jesus resolutely moves forward because God is in control.

When we speak of God's sovereign control, it is not a call for us to cease to think and act.

When we realize that we must set aside our agenda, it is not an excuse for inactivity.

Rather our expectations are checked by the life God puts before us. We can and should step out in faith, trusting He will guide and direct. When hardship comes and the life we had hoped to have is dashed, we must see God has not short changed us in his grace, but rather is preparing us to see his grace work in our painful circumstances.

God's agenda is guided by God's salvation

God's agenda was missed by the disciples and crowd, but is clearly seen in the unfolding events. Jesus' entry on the donkey was not as outlandish as we may think, but pointed to the salvation God intended to offer. Triumphant generals, conquering heroes come on great steeds. But Jesus' choice was the symbol of peace, of prosperity. It was an agricultural tool not a weapon of war; it would be like Patton entering Berlin on a tractor, not a tank.

The people cheer and celebrate and he does not stop their misguided notions, for despite their foolish expectations, Jesus comes to save them...not from the Romans, but from themselves. So Jesus' entry is peaceful, but not easy. He comes as the sacrifice.

This is what the entering pilgrims unknowingly are singing from Psalm 118:27. The sacrifice is to be bound to the altar for sacrifice. Jesus, seated on the colt never saddled, a picture of a sacred animal destined for sacrifice (Dt 21:2) is that sacrifice.

The victory he provides is not over the Romans, but the victory he offers one over them. Sin has conquered them, holding them in captivity. He comes to free them in a way they do not expect. As the crowds cheer, wanting Jesus to bless them according to their agenda, Jesus willingly comes to fulfill his own agenda, one that far exceeds the foolish expectations of the crowd.

When Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, what Mark records is stark. The entrance is anything but a triumphal entry. Unlike the other gospel writers, Mark gives additional information, as Jesus goes to the Temple, looks around and leaves since it is so late.

The revelers are gone and Jesus is alone. The Temple, where sacrifices were offered stands cold and seemingly empty now. For the One true sacrifice has come. Yet no one seems to know.

Jesus does not tour the Temple like a tourist enthralled by the sights. The glittering gold, the glistening white marble and the gigantic stones do not dazzle him. He *looked around*, a word used not of gawking, but to scrutinize, a critical stare. He offers no prayer or sacrifice. Rather what was promised in the opening verses of this gospel, the expectation taken from Malachi 3 is fulfilled: "The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple..."

If this were the whole story, of conflicting expectations and mistaken agendas, the Jesus' entry into Jerusalem would be ironic and sad. If the disciples don't get it right, how can we. But in hearing this story again we should soon recognize that we, as the readers, like Mark's audience in Rome in the decades following the story are not without hope.

Despite our expectations for hope God does not offer, a salvation from superficial suffering, Christ still moves toward the cross to secure God's agenda, his sacrifice in our place, so that God's expectation of securing for Himself a people will take place. He will be victorious.

For us, this day, we must set aside our agendas, re-evaluate our expectations, repent of our demands of God to give to us what we think best, and with outstretched hands receive what we need the most. Rather than being angry at God for not kowtowing to our wishes and whims, we must see that God will change and transform us, bending and shaping our desires to conform to His expectations for us.

Then we can join in celebrating Christ's entrance into Jerusalem with a new set of expectations, knowing that God has saved us from ourselves. That Christ rode into Jerusalem to die and he calls us to follow him to that cross.

As we enter these final days before Easter, consider once again that calling, so that as we gather this Thursday to hear again the solemn words of his suffering and join together on Easter morning, the empty tomb will be our hope.