

March 29, 2026

Palm Sunday: The King Who Comes to Die

John 12:12-28

Vernon Advent Christian Church

Introduction...[Holy Week and emails]

There is something powerful about expectations. Expectations shape almost everything about how we experience life. Think about how a child counts down the days to Christmas morning. Or even something as simple as going to a restaurant you've heard great things about. You walk in already expecting an incredible meal. Expectations frame the moment before the moment ever arrives.

But expectations can also set us up for deep disappointment. The job you thought would fulfill you turns out to be exhausting. The relationship you believed would heal your loneliness becomes complicated. The season of life you assumed would bring clarity instead brings confusion. Often, it's not just the reality that troubles us, it's the gap between what we expected and what actually happened.

And this is not just true in everyday life, it's especially true in our spiritual lives. We come to God with expectations, don't we? Sometimes spoken. Often unspoken. We expect him to answer prayers in certain ways, to move on our timeline or to work according to how we would prefer. We expect clarity, comfort, and sometimes even control. And when those expectations aren't met, we can feel confused, discouraged, or even distant from him as if the problems lie with him.

This raises an important question for us today. What happens when our expectations don't align with God's reality? What do we do when God doesn't meet the picture we have of him in our minds? This is the tension we step into when we come to John's account of what we call Palm Sunday in John 12.

For generations the Jewish people have lived under foreign oppression. First, it was the Babylonians, then the Persians, then the Greeks and now the Romans. And they have longed for deliverance. They have read the promises of the prophets of a coming king, God's Messiah, who will restore what had been lost. And now, suddenly, there is a man entering their city who seems to embody all those hopes.

But what if they misunderstand him? What if the king they are celebrating is not the king they expect? And it's in the midst of this tension that we begin to see not only their misunderstanding, but even our own. Because like the crowds, we want a king who fixes, who delivers and who restores according to our timing.

But what happens when the way he brings restoration and deliverance is not through immediate victory, but through surrender? And it is here that we find ourselves today. If you are able, please stand with me as I read our passage this morning found in the Gospel of John 12:12-28. [Read Passage]

We enter into the narrative at the height of a fever pitch. Everything Jesus has ever taught and all the miracles he performed while on the earth have led up to this point as he enters into Jerusalem. The text reads, "The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem."

The city is full to the brim. The feast spoken of here is the Passover and it has drawn Jews on their annual pilgrimage from across the region. Some scholars estimate that there were between 150,000 to 250,000 extra people in Jerusalem for this Passover. And their hearts are filled with memories and a deep longing. For Passover is the feast that commemorates Israel's deliverance from Egypt, the moment when God acted decisively to rescue his people from oppression. Each of them bringing with them their lamb to be sacrificed. And into that environment, Jesus enters.

The crowd responds instinctively. They take palm branches and go out to meet him. And these palm branches were not random decorations. The palm branches signify a royal, festive welcome for Jesus as the triumphant King of Israel, fulfilling their messianic expectations. In the same way that people would meet their conquering king outside the city and enter back into the city in a celebratory procession, we see the same thing here.

Their voices rise together as they quote from the Messianic Psalm 118, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!" "Hosanna" is both a praise and a plea. It means "save now," or "deliver us." It is worship blended together with urgency. They are not simply honoring Jesus, they are asking him for deliverance. It's as if they are expecting him to march right into Jerusalem and overthrow the Romans right then and there. For if Jesus has the power to raise the dead, surely the Romans will be no match from him.

But then Jesus does something unexpected. He mounts a young donkey and rides it into the city. We find the story of this young donkey in more detail in Matt. 21, Mark 11 and Luke 19. At first glance, it may seem like something so small, but it is loaded with meaning. John connects it to the prophecy found in Zechariah 9:9, part of which we heard read for this morning, which John quotes in vs. 15, "Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt."

Jesus did this both as a deliberate fulfillment of prophecy and as a demonstration of the character of his kingdom. You see, God's kingdom is a spiritual kingdom, not a military kingdom. Jesus did not come as a conquering military king but as a messenger of peace. We begin to see the juxtaposition here. It would be like expecting a military parade and instead witnessing a servant entering quietly, without armor, without spectacle and without force. The crowd wants visible power but Jesus embodies humble authority.

And John tells us something else important. The disciples themselves did not fully understand this in the moment. It is only later, after Jesus is glorified, meaning after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, that the meaning of these things become clear to his followers. That reminds us that God's work often unfolds in ways we do not immediately grasp. We interpret events through our expectations, but understanding often comes only after we have walked further with him. May God give us eyes to see and the faith to trust him in what he is doing in our lives.

Now the crowd's excitement is not happening in isolation. Look at vs. 17-19. Looking at these verses we see that the excitement is being fueled by the testimony of eyewitnesses. In the previous chapter, we read of one of Jesus' most incredible miracles where he raises his friend Lazarus from the dead. As you can imagine, if something like that were to happen around here, word would spread and crowds would gather and people would be curious to see the one who had done such a thing. And that's exactly what

happened as those who witnessed the raising of Lazarus begin to tell others. The story is spreading. Something extraordinary has happened and people are responding.

And this reveals something important about how the good news of Jesus is going to be spread. It is not only through personal experience but through shared witness. This is the sort of thing that we have been talking about in our community groups the past few weeks. One person's encounter with Christ becomes another person's curiosity. We are to tell others what we have seen the Lord do in our lives and in the lives of others.

But not everyone in the crowd is celebrating. The Pharisees see what is happening and respond with frustration in vs. 19, "You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him." They speak in exasperation but their words carry unintended truth. The influence of Jesus is expanding beyond their control. That's, ultimately, why they want to kill him because they can no longer control him or the movement. The "world" is beginning to move toward him, but not yet in understanding.

Because crowds can gather for the wrong reasons, can they not? It's important for us to realize that enthusiasm does not always equal faith. And excitement does not always equal understanding. For the same voices that shout "Hosanna" in one moment can fall silent, or even turn hostile, when expectations are not met as scripture tells us that many of the same voices shouting "Hosanna!" will be shouting "Crucify him!" a few days later.

Then comes a subtle but profound shift in vs. 20-22, "Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks." Now it's unclear if we're still on Palm Sunday here or into the first couple of days of the week as some scholars suggest, but either way, we're told that a group of outsiders, Greek Gentiles who were most likely proselytes, had traveled to Jerusalem for Passover.

This moment signals something bigger than the crowd even realizes. These are outsiders and their presence introduces a global dimension to the story, affirming the Pharisee's fear. It seems that, indeed, "the whole world has gone after him."

They approach Philip with a simple request, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." They wanted see Jesus. Possibly to ask their questions, possibly to seek a miracle. Whatever the case, they wanted to see Jesus. Now we might wonder, why Philip? Well, Philip was from Bethsaida, a region with high Greek influence, suggesting he was likely bilingual, possessed a Greek name, and was seen as more approachable.

But even then, Philip then approached Andrew before going to Jesus. This request carries weight. It is not just curiosity, it is a turning point. Even the nations are beginning to seek the Messiah. And this moment triggers something in Jesus. He knows that the time had arrived for what he had come to do.

And so Jesus responds, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus has said, "My hour has not yet come." Three times before this event Jesus uses this phrase to communicate that he was operating under the Father's timing and not his own.

Now, suddenly, his hour has come. But what is surprising is how he defines that hour in vs. 24. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

Once again, this is not the language of conquest. It is the language of surrender. With this simple yet profound image, Jesus is not only foretelling his own death. He is redefining the pathway to life and purpose.

On the surface, the image feels backwards or upside down. A seed is meant to live, to grow and to thrive. And yet, Jesus says its fruitfulness, or life, is dependent on its death. As long as the seed remains intact, preserved, and protected, it is ultimately unproductive, full of potential but never transformed. But when it is buried, when it is broken open and surrendered to the soil and it dies, it brings forth the very thing it was meant to bring. Death, in this sense, is not the end of its purpose. It is the pathway into it.

Hopefully, we're starting to see Jesus' point here. He is first speaking of himself. The crowd expected a conquering king, but Jesus reveals that his glory will come through the cross. His "falling into the earth" is his crucifixion. And his "death" is the means by which salvation will come and the "fruit" is the countless lives redeemed through his sacrifice. What looked like the greatest loss would become the greatest victory. What appeared to be the end would become the beginning of new life for many.

But this is not just about Jesus, it is also about us. Because immediately after this verse, Jesus turns the same principle toward his followers in vs 25-26. "Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life." This is not a call to self-rejection, but to reordering what we value most. The path of fruitfulness in the kingdom of God is the path of surrender.

We live in a world that tells us to preserve ourselves, to promote ourselves, to protect our comfort, and to chase our own version of success. But Jesus says if you hold tightly to your life, you will ultimately lose it. If you insist on living by the world's standards, you remain unproductive, never stepping into the deeper life God intends.

What does this look like for us in real life? It looks like dying daily to self, to our need for control and trusting in God's timing. It looks like laying down our pride in order to love someone sacrificially, like we talked about last week. It may look like forgiving when it costs us, serving when it's inconvenient or remaining faithful in a season that feels hidden and unseen. These are the quiet "deaths" we experience but according to Jesus, they are never wasted. They are the very places where fruit begins to grow.

You know, we often want the fruit without the falling, the growth without the surrender and the resurrection without the cross. But Jesus makes it clear. There is no fruit apart from this kind of dying. Yet, again, this is not a call to despair. It is a call to trust. Because the same God who brings life out of a buried seed is the God who brings purpose out of every surrendered place in our lives.

In the last few verses of our passage, we get a glimpse of the humanity of Jesus and his surrender to the Father's will when he says, "Now is my soul troubled." Jesus is not detached from what is coming. He feels the weight of it. The cross is not easy. It is not abstract. It is real. He knows what awaits him.

And he asks, "What shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour?'" There is honesty here. He does not deny the weight of what lies ahead. Yet, instead of asking to escape the cross, he submits to it, "For this purpose I have come." Jesus does not turn away but he continues his steady march to the cross. And, here we see the heart of true surrender, not

the absence of struggle, but the choice of obedience in the midst of it. Jesus teaches us that faith is not pretending the burden is easy. It is trusting God's purpose is greater.

And so we find ourselves caught in the same tension of expectation we see in the crowds that day. The crowd welcomed Jesus with palm branches and shouts of "Hosanna," believing they understood what kind of King he was. They expected deliverance and victory, but on their terms and in their timing.

And yet, as Jesus begins to speak, the tone shifts. "The hour has come," he says, but not for a throne as they imagined. Instead, he speaks of a grain of wheat falling into the earth and dying. He speaks of losing life to find it. He speaks of a glory that comes through surrender.

This is where their expectations begin to unravel. The same crowd that celebrated him as King struggled to follow him to the cross. Why? Because Jesus did not meet their expectations. He exceeded them in a way they could not yet understand.

And if we're honest, we are not so different. We, too, come with palm branches in hand, welcoming Jesus into the parts of our lives where he aligns with what we hope he will do. But what happens when he begins to lead us down a road we did not expect? What happens when his way involves surrender instead of control, sacrifice instead of comfort and waiting instead of immediate rescue?

This week, as we move from the cheers of Palm Sunday toward the shadows of the cross and, ultimately, the glorious resurrection, we are invited to lay down more than just palm branches. We are invited to lay down our very lives, including our expectations, to let go of our need for God to work according to our plans and to trust him even when the path leads through suffering before it leads to glory. Because the truth of Holy Week is this, what looks like loss is often the very place where God is bringing life.

So as we enter this sacred week, may we not just follow Jesus with celebration, but with surrender. May we walk with him not only when the road is easy and marked with success, but when it is hard and costly. And may we trust that even when our expectations fall to the ground like that grain of wheat, God is at work bringing forth something far more beautiful than we could have imagined. Let's pray.

Benediction: "May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ go with you. And as you leave this place, may you let go of your expectations and trust his perfect will. May you have the courage to follow him, not only in celebration, but in surrender. And as you walk into this Holy Week, may you draw near to Christ, trusting that his way leads to true glory. Amen"