

March 25, 2018 - Following Jesus to the Cross: Failure and Risk Management Along the Way – Rev. Seth D Jones ©
Scripture: John 12:12-27; John 19:16b-22

First Reading: John 12

Today, our service is divided in half, sort of. We are traversing an arc of a story. Normally we spread the story out through the week, but this year, we are doing the entrance to Jerusalem – The Celebration of the Palms – and the Passion – Jesus’ crucifixion on the Cross, in one day. It seems like a lot, and it is, but there is something important in doing it this way.

In the Gospel of John, there are these huge, wheeling, counter-balancing paradoxes going on that are meant to challenge us on a deep and fundamental level. Last week, we looked at the paradox of what it means to be ‘convicted’ and how the challenges and demands of the state, the empire, and the pressing in of the Holy Spirit upon us creates an equal challenge and demand upon us in the face of ‘convictions’. Before that, we saw that judgment, an activity we all do because that is what we do as human beings, is also a paradox in which God’s love and grace is counter-balanced with our human condition.

Today, we come back to where we started when we talked about Awakening with Lazarus – the paradox of our expectations and the expectations of God. The Celebration of the Palms is the height of our expectations. We want a king, a leader, who will defy the world and bring freedom, prosperity, and greatness back to who we believe we should be in the world. We want a leader who will guide our militaries to victory and who we can look to for guidance and meaning. We are the crowd who has been following Jesus all these weeks, and we are the people who wave the palms and sing the songs of glory.

This raising up of Jesus on the chariot of our expectations is the risk we take in employing, christening, electing a king, a leader, who will lead us into the fulfillment of all those expectations. We want, no, we demand, that our expectations be met in all these earthly ways. We take a risk on the person who seems most likely to do those things for us, and who better than someone who subverts the authority of Rome and church authority alike? Who better than a miracle worker and convener of huge crowds?
“Look, the whole world has gone after him!”, the leaders say.

Jesus says, “Fine, I will come into your city like a king.” And so he rides in on a donkey – the symbol of peace, not war and victory. The wresting away of Israel from Roman rule is a spiritual war, not a revolution that re-establishes the greatness of the kingdom from a haloed past. Jesus raises up our expectations in order to present God’s expectations that much more clearly.

So let us rise with the people of Jerusalem and welcome Jesus with all our expectations and hopes and dreams for an earthly future. Let us sing, “All Glory Laud and Honor” together:

Sing together

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Second Reading: John 19

Theologian Sherrie Brown says of Jesus going to the Cross, “*If this is the story of a traditional messiah king, it is the most stunning failure in the history of the world.*”

Failure is the other side of risk-taking. The people took a risk on Jesus for their earthly success, and now they are the ones standing by the side of the road mocking Jesus as he goes to his execution as an enemy of the state. This is a story of catastrophic failure. This week, as we move through Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Dark Saturday, we are meant to deeply confront what it means to go through failure, death, nothingness, and the unraveling of meaning. That is why we follow the life of Christ every year through the Church calendar.

And so, failure is the focus of our attention today. We are the crowd who welcomed Jesus into the city with laud, glory, and honor, and we are the crowd that celebrates Jesus’ failure as a leader who ends up on a Cross. It is worth remembering that the Cross was long considered to be the great scandal of the faith. The scandalous element comes from the intent of a crucifixion itself. In Rome, a crucifixion is the symbol of ultimate shame, ultimate failure, ultimate scorn. In rebellious areas, the centurions would line the road with crucified terrorists and rebels to instill fear, shame, and powerlessness into the minds of the people. It is hard to remember that this

is what the Cross actually means, since so many people wear the symbol as jewelry and the image is present in so many places. The Cross, though, in the ancient world, was the preeminent symbol of failure, shame, and guilt.

I cannot overemphasize the level of Jesus' failure. This is why I tell people who deny the Resurrection and hold up Jesus as a great world teacher that they are wrong. Jesus is a horrible teacher for how to live in this world. Jesus is a terrible model for what success looks like in this world. The story is a story of how a *very small* radicalized sect challenged both the empire and the religious institutions and drew large crowds to them. Without the Resurrection, it is also a story of how that very small sect imploded and failed spectacularly. Without the Resurrection, all the Jesus story does is confront us with the failure of a wild, starry-eyed cult in the ancient world.

And strangely, this is what the story and the history of church calls us to reflect upon for an entire week. Why would John, and the other Gospel writers compel us to reflect on this so deeply?

For us today, we have very few options to reflect on our failures and spectacular downfalls. In America, we like to gloss them over and refer to failures as 'unfulfilled successes and opportunities'. When the failures harm other people, we have a culturally approved process for recovery for our celebrities, political leaders, and business leaders. They do the bad thing, or fail on camera in some huge way; then they remain quiet for a few days while they hire image consultants; then they issue an apparent heart-felt apology; and then we watch them rebuild their career. We feel good about bearing witness to their public tragedy and redemption.

That process is transforming lately, though. The apologies aren't working as well anymore. The #metoo, #blacklivesmatter, #neveragain, movements aren't standing for the old style of American apology and redemption process anymore. Part of the reason, regardless of what you think of those movements, the old style doesn't work anymore is because it didn't work in the first place. Our culture has no outlets for shame, failure, or guilt, and never has. All those dark, difficult experiences are subverted by public management of how we should feel, punitive justice, and the rejection of guilt and shame as invalid ways of responding to failure.

And yet, here hangs the promised savior of the world upon the ultimate symbol of failure and shame. The easy approach to this failure and our own

personal failures is to simply never take risks with other people or in our own lives anymore, because the level of failure and shame can be so extreme. The easy thing to do is to set up a kind of spiritual and relational risk management strategy so that failure, shame, and guilt are all mitigated and mollified.

And, in this world, if you are a woman in the entertainment world, there are good reasons to manage your risks. I don't know if the #metoo movement will change anything, but I think we would all agree that the threat of sexual assault and paying people who work as hard as men less than men is not a good model going forward and having some risk management strategies in place would help. I don't know if #blacklivesmatter is making any difference, but if you are a black person in the city today, it seems like a good idea to have some management strategies in place so you don't get shot for holding your cell phone in your backyard, or driving your family to school, or trying to survive on the streets. If you are a teen in a school, you may not know what works in terms of guns in the culture, but you certainly know whatever is out there now is not working if your school is the next random target for a mass shooting, so having some risk management strategies for surviving are a good idea.

(As an aside, my high school in Wisconsin just had 4 students arrested for planning a mass shooting in response to the marches yesterday. They had the weapons and blueprints for the school in their houses. They were ready to go.)

But all the things I have just said are examples of worldly expectations, earthly needs and desires. All the failures and problems I have spoken of are in terms of earthly expectations. I spent some time with them because one of the things that is happening on the Cross, if we take the Gospel of John seriously, and the other Gospels as well, is that Jesus is taking all these earthly expectations with him to the Cross.

Why would this happen? I think it is because right at the center this profound symbol of shame, at the deepest point of Jesus' earthly failure, is where the success of God's expectations for us begin. The Cross is many things, and over the past few weeks we have spoken of what is happening there. This week, the Cross is the intersection of our expectations in this world, and God's eternal expectations for us.

It is very hard for us to see this intersection, though. Part of the reason is our culture, and part of the reason is that we are simply human. Our failures and their effect upon us are like being an actor on a stage. You know you are in a 5-act play and that you are in act 4. The thing about this play that we are all in, however, is that we don't have the script for the final act. Nor did we for the previous acts. But in this 4th act, we have lost everything. Our failure is hanging before us and it consumes our lives. And as we look out into the future, we do not see the author of the script anywhere. This is the position of the disciples who have abandoned Jesus. This is the position of the women and the beloved disciple who watch Jesus die on the Cross. This is our position whenever confronted by the failure of our lives.

Failure, though, is one of the lenses that we can read Scripture from beginning to end with. We can read most of Scripture as a description of what God does when people fail spectacularly.

Right at the beginning, is there a greater failure than Adam and Eve in the Garden? How do you screw that up? That is sort of what we are still figuring out, isn't it?

In our modern age, we read the story of Noah as a moral dilemma about why a God would act the way he did, but the traditional way to read that story is about the failure of both human and angel alike to care for the land and people of God's creation. How bad is that failure that it requires a flood to solve it?

Abraham is a failure as a father to Isaac. Joseph is a terrible brother, but his brothers are even worse. Moses is a killer and the people he brings together fail spectacularly by building a golden calf, which requires a second tablet of 10 commandments to be written because Moses smashed the first in a rage. The story of David is the story of a failed kingdom, and the story of Solomon is the story of failing up by amassing wealth and greed at such a rate that the only possible outcome is the fracturing of the state.

The prophets, one and all, continually call the people to account for failing to live up to God's expectations for humanity.

And that brings us to this moment where we are confronted by the one who carried so many expectations, who hangs from a Cross.

Reflect for a moment on your personal failures. Some of them may be small. Some may have harmed other people in small and great ways. Some may reflect personal re-creations of a past that have only happened in your mind. Some may be based in a verifiable, objective reality. This may be an exercise that is much easier for some of you than others. I, for one, am no stranger to the idea of being a failure.

Now, I want you to listen closely. Here, in the Bible, is an accounting of 7500 years of failure. From start to almost finish, you are in good company with wealthy and poor people, with people of power and slaves, with deeply faithful people and not so faithful people, with disciples and those who just tag along. This is a guide book to failure. And all of it within this book and within your life right now is what Jesus has taken to the Cross with him. The Cross is where our failed expectations and experiences meet with God's eternal success and victories. This is what Holy Week asks us to confront. The Cross is where *we, with Christ*, are most human and most divine.

Your failure, our failure, is the beginning of God's success.

Amen.