

When Hope Gets in the Way
Mark 1: 1 – 11

(preached on March 24, 2024)

Just a few miles up the road from here, in Amherst, a brilliant American poet made her home. Emily Dickinson never traveled far from that home, but in her poetry she wrote about a wide range of human experiences. One of my favorites is a poem about hope. She writes:

“Hope is the thing with feathers, that perches in the soul, and sings the tune without the words, and never stops at all.”

As Emily Dickinson knew, hope is a powerful thing. When times are tough, hope can boost our spirits and lift our sights to brighter horizons. For example, hope helps with the stresses of parenthood. When your children are small and trying your patience as kids do, you can hope that as they grow up, sooner or later they’ll learn to behave. When things at work aren’t going well, you can hope that it’s only temporary. You can look forward to a better situation in the future. When a relationship falls apart, you can hope that someday your broken heart will heal and you’ll feel that life is worth living again. Hope is a powerful thing.

In our gospel passage for today, from the gospel of Mark, hope is springing up all over the place. The people who greet Jesus with joyful cheers are full of hope. They welcome him with shouts of jubilation as he enters Jerusalem. And it isn’t just a lot of noise. The people show their welcome by taking off their coats and spreading them on the ground before him. They lay in his path leafy branches they have cut from the fields. That’s how people would welcome a conquering hero in those days.

Seeing Jesus riding into Jerusalem, the people are full of hope: hope that here at last is the righteous ruler the prophets have foretold. Hope that Jesus is the messiah God has sent to save them from the suffering they’ve endured under Roman rule. Hope that Jesus will lead them to victory over their oppressors, ending years of degradation, deprivation, and fear. They shout with jubilation, full of hope that he will usher in a new reign of justice and peace.

Hope can do amazing things. Hope plays a big part in our sense of well-being. When times are tough, hope for better times can get us through. When it feels like all the doors are closing in our face, hope can open a window. So what about you? What do you find yourself hoping for this morning?

Maybe you’re hoping that this cold, rainy weather will break soon and you’ll be able to work in the garden. Maybe you’re hoping that those tests doctor ordered will show that the pain you’re having can be treated easily and inexpensively.

The author Paul Quinnett writes about the importance of hope in his book, *Pavlov's Trout*. He uses an example from the sport of fishing. He writes, "Fishing is hope experienced...When the true fisherman is asked, 'How can you fish all day without a hit?' he replies, 'Hold it! I think I feel something.' If the line goes slack, the true fisherman says, 'He'll be back!'" Quinnett goes on, "When it comes to the human spirit, hope is all. Without hope, there's no yearning, no desire for a better tomorrow, no belief that the next cast will bring the big strike."

As human beings, we need hope. Without hope for the big catch, or the better job, or the new relationship, life would be bleak. Hope is essential to the human spirit. But while hope is essential, it's also true that hope can be a problem at times.

That's because there is such a thing as false hope. False hope can get us into trouble. False hope can blind us to reality. For example, take the reality of aging. It's a fact that we all get older. But a lot of us don't want to accept that fact. Not long ago I heard about one woman who simply refused to accept it. She had another idea. This became obvious at a family birthday party, when her grandson asked her a question.

"Grandma, how old are you?" he asked.

The whole family knew that Grandma tended to avoid the subject of her age. They held their breath as they waited to see how she would respond.

"I'm 39 and holding," she said.

But the little boy wasn't satisfied with that answer. He asked, "Well, how old would you be if you let go?"

False hope can be a problem sometimes. False hope can blind you to the reality of a situation. When you think a serious problem is just going to get better by itself, and you ignore the advice of everyone around you, you're caught up in false hope. When you've convinced yourself that your daughter's drug problem is just a temporary form of recreation, you're under the spell of false hope. When you're full of false hope, you refuse to listen.

Hope can keep us going, but it sometimes holds us back. False hope can prevent us from recognizing reality. False hope is a hindrance when you're in way over your head at work, and you tell yourself all you have to do is work a little harder and things will get better. False hope can also be a hindrance if you're out of work, unemployed, and you're convinced you don't have to do anything: that you can just wait for the big break that's around the corner.

On that first Palm Sunday in Jerusalem, the people were exuberant, filled with the hope that Jesus was the messiah for whom they had been waiting. They were filled with hope that he was the conquering hero who would defeat the power of Rome. It was an exciting time. But it wasn't long before their hope turned to despair. As the week went on, they realized that Jesus wasn't going to lead them to victory over their Roman rulers.

By the end of the week, Jesus had been arrested, arraigned, and put to death on the cross. The people who had welcomed him with jubilant cheers were overcome with disappointment. What they had so passionately hoped for did not come to pass. But the hope for a victory over Rome was a false hope. They had been clinging to false hope.

Sometimes you and I cling to false hope, too. But Palm Sunday calls us to let go of false hope. We may have to let go of the hope that a problem in our lives is going to get better on its own. We may have to let go of the hope that a relationship is going to become what we would like it to be.

But letting go of false hope is not the same as giving in to despair. Letting go of false hope actually opens a way for God to act. Letting go of false hope makes room for God to work in your life. Letting go of false hope makes room for God to do something new, something different from what you had been hoping for. It opens a way for God to do the wonderful things God longs to do.

As the cheers and shouts died down in Jerusalem that day, the people had to let go of the hope that Jesus would defeat the forces of Rome and usher in a new regime here on earth. As they picked up their scattered clothes from the ground, they had to let go of their false hope. They had to experience disappointment. But that wasn't the end of the story for them. The story of Jesus doesn't end in disappointment. The story of Jesus opens the way to a new kind of hope.

The people who greeted Jesus with shouts of joy on that first Palm Sunday had to let go to make a way for God to do something different from what they had been hoping for: something even more wonderful. They had to put false hopes behind them, and look to what God was really doing. They had to realize that Jesus would usher in a kingdom, but that it would not be a kingdom as the world understands it. It would be the kingdom of God: more wonderful than they could possibly have imagined.

Sometimes, no matter how hard you and I hope, things aren't going to go the way we hope they will. The perfect job may not be just around the corner. The relationship we're hoping for may not happen because you can't make someone love you, no matter how hard you try. You might not get the kind of Savior you're longing for. But Palm Sunday says that's OK because when you let go of false hope, you open a way for God to work in your life. When you let go of false hope, you're open to the possibilities God has in mind for you. You're free to receive the wonders God can do, free to enter into a joy the world cannot give or take away.

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Palm Sunday