

"Reception and Rejection"

Psalm 118:19-29; Matthew 21: 1-11

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

March 29, 2015 – Palm Sunday – Rev. Ronald Botts

When a baby is born into the world there is usually a great deal of hopefulness. This new life is full of potential. Certainly this will be the handsomest boy, the most beautiful girl. He or she will be smart and clever, the center of attention, the life of the party, the kindest of persons.

A child of a day or two can do no wrong; but then they grow up and time proves that they are not perfect, not without flaws. They turn out to be very human. But, oh those first glorious days when nothing can dispute that here is greatness that you can hold easily in one arm.

So it was with a certain child I'm thinking of. There was great hope and promise for him but, alas, he proved to be a great disappointment. When he was 14 one of his teachers told him, "You'll never amount to anything." A year later, after doing poorly in several of his courses, another instructor strongly suggested that he leave school and said harshly, "Your very presence spoils the class for me."

So the young man left school and wandered about for a time. Weeks turned into months. As he walked about the countryside he began to develop a curiosity about the natural universe. To his delight he found an amazing interconnection among all of creation, even extending to the distant star and planets. It peaked his interest as nothing before ever had.

So, in spite of his dislike for formal education, he applied for admission to a technical school. But he failed the entrance exam. So he went back to high school to satisfy his deficiencies and, a year later, gained entry to college. Still he had trouble in the classroom and was a mediocre student at best. He did eventually graduate, but only because a close friend was willing to share his class notes with him and help him study for his tests.

After graduation he supported himself with odd jobs while better positions passed him by. Finally he got a modest government job. He wasn't the most motivated worker, but he was able to hold on to his position. When he wasn't busy with routine paper work he occupied himself doing mathematical calculations.

Now this isn't the end of the story, for if nothing had changed no one would have likely remembered this particular fellow. The opinion of his teachers, classmates, and fellow employees—that of a likeable enough person, but with little promise—would have stood. Yet circumstances did change and opportunities arose and, in the end, you could say that he finally found his place in life.

This child of hope, who quickly turned into a disappointment, became a grown man of respect and then a mature man of eminence. His name was Albert Einstein. The boy's former instructors were wrong; he did amount to something. It's those teachers who are now forgotten. Einstein was vindicated by time.

Years before another baby was born and he, too, was a child of hope. Then the thread of history becomes very loose and it's only years later that we pick up his story again. He meets a man and takes in his words. At this moment yesterday and today come rushing together for him, and he is suddenly given a glimpse into tomorrow. He knows what he will do; indeed, what he has to do.

That life-changing event for Jesus is his baptism in the river Jordan by a prophetic figure named John. It is there that he undeniably feels God's hand upon him and knows that his work is about to begin. His first public words are, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news."

From there he goes throughout Galilee and nearby areas teaching and preaching and showing by example what a life dedicated to God is like. He reached out to those broken of body or broken of spirit and brought healing into their lives.

The poor came readily to him for they were steeped in misery and eagerly sought relief from their pain. The rich and the powerful, however, were largely indifferent to this man and his message. If anything it was threatening to their position and prestige, or so it seemed. Yet, he simply told the truth as it was and laid out new possibilities.

Perhaps at no time did his ministry seem stronger, or was his popularity more widespread, than when he entered into Jerusalem during Passover that year. Everything that had gone before was now channeled into this time and this place. Is it possible that in Bethany, the night before, he could have remembered a passage from one of the psalms: "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord... Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar."

If this scripture was pointing to him, then it would soon be fulfilled. The next morning Jesus and his party moved from Bethany to the next village, Bethpage, and there he gives the disciples these instructions: "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately.

"The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on the animals. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Zechariah: 'Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey.'

"The crowds went ahead of him shouting, 'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!'"

The crowds were absolutely with him that day. He was extolled with shouting and praise. People pressed forward to catch a glimpse of him as he passed by. They made a veritable carpet for him with their cloaks and branches and flowers. The children probably shouted too, even if they didn't understand what was so special about this man. His disciples walked alongside him, proud but cautious. Those in authority also watched and bided their time and schemed a way to get him out of their hair.

Things would take a downward turn before the week was out, but that was not a surprise to Jesus. He had been telling those close to him that he would be persecuted, for there were those who could not let him continue. They would reject him in the clash of good with evil but, despite their apparent victory, they would not prevail in the long run. He would be vindicated by time.

Those same forces of privilege and injustice and dehumanization still abound. They are all around us, in the world of yesterday and in the world of today. They deny life and are strongly asserted by those who have the most to lose. Persons on the seats of power are not prone to give up their hard-won consolidations. Money and power are not easily conceded. This is no game, but serious business...deadly serious.

Those who dare to challenge the self-absorbed must be ready to face the consequences. The strong will not relinquish their power without a fight. Those who regularly take more than their due will inevitably extract it at the expense of others. Those who want to control their world will not be reluctant to climb up and over whatever obstacles are in their way. Might always tests right.

Today a child is born; thousands, in fact. Tiny ones of hope and promise. What kind of world are they born into? What kind of life will be open to them? Is it a place of love and caring, of opportunity and advancement? Or a place of subordination and suffering, of pollution and depersonalization? Is having children an act of faith or a sign of foolishness?

Our psalm for the morning continues: "You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you. O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever."

It is a reminder to us that God is still in control of this world, despite those who call it theirs and attempt to make themselves supreme. They will not win out, for God will always be vindicated in the end. Evil will not triumph. Its power is too fleeting and limited.

As we enter the events of Holy Week this year we again see Jesus received, then rejected. It would be very easy to stop with Good Friday and become a pessimistic people because we live in a pessimistic age. Instead, though, we are called to be an Easter people, to deny that death holds sway over life. For we have been shown compelling love that is willing to go the limit for us, and we are called to show that love for others. In caring, in acts of kindness, in standing up for what is right, in building a more just and equitable world we carry on the work of our Savior Jesus. In proclaiming the Good News of God's amazing love for us, we continue the ministry of Christ.

Palm Sunday is a day when our emphasis should be on hope and celebration. For our King is coming and cannot be denied and his shall be a kingdom without equal and without end. He comes to give life to the world, and he comes to give life to you and me.

So wave your branches and shout your praise, for it is the king of glory who comes. Not into Jerusalem as he did long ago, but right here and now as he comes into your into your heart and mine.