

Welcome

Good morning all. My name is Ashley and I'm a part of the teaching team here at Catalyst. My husband and I have been coming here for a while and have really enjoyed that you guys are so friendly and welcoming. This really feels like a safe place. So, since this is a safe place, I have a confession to make: I *hate* The Office. Now, before you crucify me, I don't hate it just to hate it; i actually hate it for a legitimate reason. I had a *bunch* of people tell me that it was the funniest show that they had ever seen - and i knew that it had gotten pretty popular - and I had been a part of a 2 hour conversation with some friends with them laughing at all these scenes from the show, while I sat on the side, extremely bored because i had no idea what they were talking about. So, I finally decided to watch it. And i hate it. I was told that it was this hilarious show, but it just comes across as mean to me. I'm still watching it, hoping that it will redeem itself somehow, but as of right now, I really really don't like it.

All of my expectations of that show had been set - it's a hilarious show, even a show that you could sit and talk about for hours, laughing the whole time - but when i actually encountered it, it failed those expectations tremendously. And, anyone in this room who likes The Office can attest to the fact that failed expectations can be extremely awkward because i'm sure you don't know what to say now, since you love the Office. I don't think that these failed expectations will affect our friendship because it's just a TV show. My husband and i have differing opinions on TV shows all the time and we're managing just fine, but failed or unmet expectations can be a lot more serious than that. In fact, a lot of relationships fail because of unmet expectations. And that's even more true when God doesn't meet our expectations because this is one relationship that we put a lot of stock into. Often times, we're given expectations of God that fail us. So today we're going to be talking about what it looks like to deal with those failed expectations and to have faith that God is doing what we *need* and not necessarily what we *want*. And we're going to talk about what it means to say to say that we're still on God's side, even if God doesn't give us the step-by-step Powerpoint presentation of how it's going to go down. Because we say we are a people of the kind of faith that God is working for our good, no matter what; that God will at the very least carry us through. So, let's talk about that.

Today is Palm Sunday and so we're exploring what it looks like when God fails our expectations, like the Office did for me. We don't want to be a people who are *only* on God's side when God's doing what we want Him to, which means we must take a look at ourselves and ask whether or not we are truly on God's side through it all. And that means reminding ourselves of who God is. God is a God who is faithful and good. He is a God who makes good out of even the darkest of days. So let's begin by praising this God who redeems all things so that we can begin to ask how we can always be on the side of that God.

Message

This is the last Sunday of Lent, a season the Church reserves for self-examination and repentance. Lent is a time we confess we are sinners and ask for God's help to heal us. During Lent, we assume there are sins in our life we're not even aware of. That's one big reason we need God's help - to point out what is otherwise hidden from us.

In that spirit, we called our series this year CRINGEWORTHY: A Theory of Awkwardness. According to journalist Melissa Dahl, awkward means ‘turned the wrong way’. We feel awkward when we see ourselves through someone else’s eyes and we realize that the way they see us and the way we see ourselves don’t line up. Awkwardness is what happens when we see the gap between who we are and who we aspire to be, who God calls us to be.

We spent the first couple of weeks exploring how awkwardness can be a spiritual tool. We saw that, like the first man and woman, our natural tendency is to hide when we’re confronted with that gap between how we see ourselves and how God sees us. But if we’re willing to stay in the awkwardness, we find our growing edge. Next, we explored how both compassion and humility are essential to our journey toward wholeness. Then last week, we saw how we are called to speak up for the vulnerable and be ready to receive correction when others spot that gap in us.

Today is Palm Sunday. Within the Church, Palm Sunday is the Sunday before Jesus was crucified, which happened that following Friday. During Jesus’ ministry, He was up in the region of Galilee, kind of touring - doing some healings, some preaching - you know, Jesus stuff. Then, Jesus asks His disciples who He is and they guess correctly that He’s the Messiah and that’s when they begin their journey towards Jerusalem, where Jesus has told them that He will be crucified and will rise again in 3 days. So, Palm Sunday is the day that He enters Jerusalem.

[Scripture Slide] Turn with me to Luke 19. If you grabbed a bible from the back, it’s on page _____. And if you don’t have a bible, please feel free to keep that one and consider it a gift from us. As you’re turning there, let me tell you a story of two parades. As Jesus and His disciples approach Jerusalem, He tells some of them to go over to this town and they’ll find a colt and that they need to bring it to Him. And so they do that - they go and they get it and they bring it back. Jesus is coming from the East and is about to enter Jerusalem riding this colt.

But Jesus’ entry from the East was not the only parade entering Jerusalem that day. In fact, it wasn’t even the *main* one. And Jesus knew that. He and his disciples were heading to Jerusalem for Passover, which is a Jewish holiday that celebrated their liberation from an Evil Empire, namely Egypt. So, Rome -- incidentally an evil empire -- knew this, so the Roman governor, Pilate, always made a point to be in the capital for Passover. He came into the city with a large military parade to show who was really in charge. This meant that he has a large parade of soldiers with gleaming helmets and shiny armor. And he’s riding a huge horse, which also has shiny armor, probably made of gold and silver. Pilate enters from the *West* and he’s putting on the ultimate show of power. These two processions are coming into the city at the same time, with Jesus on one side being praised as a Messiah who will liberate the people, and Pilate on the other, showing that he’s quite the Pharaoh, with the manpower to oppress the people. This should be interesting. We’ll come back to Pilate in a second, but let’s see how the crowds respond to Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

We enter here, in Luke 19, verse 35:

So they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their garments over it for him to ride on. As he rode along, the crowds spread out their garments on the road ahead of him. When he reached the

place where the road started down the Mount of Olives, all of his followers began to shout and sing as they walked along, praising God for all the wonderful miracles they had seen. “Blessings on the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in highest heaven!” -- Luke 19:35-40

This is how Jesus enters Jerusalem: surrounded by praise to God from the crowds. The very next day, He goes to the Temple and cleanses it. He throws out the people only seeking money and power and he makes space for what God is really going to do. (Feel free to read that section because it's pretty powerful) That's the beginning of Holy Week.

Now, let's pause here for a second. This seems kind of awkward. We've got a lot of people in the same city, for two very different reasons. We have the people praising Jesus on one side; we've got the people praising Pilate on the other side; and then we've got all of the people in the middle who don't really know who to praise. This is pretty awkward because it asks the question “who is the real king? Is it the one liberating and creating freedom? Or the one dominating and showing power?” And the side you choose exposes a lot about who you are. But wait: the awkward doesn't end here! Let's jump from Sunday to Friday. He enters the city on the donkey on Sunday, cleanses the Temple on Monday, and then preaches to the people about the changes that are coming. Then one of the people he's been traveling with for 3 years betrays him and gives the authorities a reason to arrest him. Let's enter into Pilate (yep, same guy) talking with the crowds about what to do with Jesus. Turn with me to Luke 23:

Pilate argued with them, because he wanted to release Jesus. But they kept shouting, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” For the third time he demanded, “Why? What crime has he committed? I have found no reason to sentence him to death. So I will have him flogged, and then I will release him.” But the mob shouted louder and louder, demanding that Jesus be crucified, and their voices prevailed. So Pilate sentenced Jesus to die as they demanded. As they had requested, he released Barabbas, the man in prison for insurrection and murder. But he turned Jesus over to them to do as they wished. -- Luke 23:20-25

So, this is literally just 5 days after these same crowds were cheering as He entered the city. They were praising and thanking the Lord *for this exact man!* That makes this whole thing even more awkward. And as the readers, we can see their gap: they turned on God real quick. This is pretty much the Ancient World equivalent of how quickly trolls turn on each other on the Internet. When we use the awkwardness lens that we've been talking about, we understand what was really going on: The crowds thought that Jesus was leading a Israel-style counter-military parade, exemplifying his own form of domination and power. But, when Jesus enters into the city and not only doesn't do anything to address Rome's presence or seem to care at all about Rome, but then takes a look at the Jewish establishment and attacks that, the crowds show that if Jesus wasn't going to do what they wanted him to do (i.e. take down Rome), then they were just going to get rid of him.

So, remember Pilate? He rode in at the same time that Jesus did. When Jesus rode in, He was riding a colt, which isn't very large. Donkey's themselves aren't very large and this was a young

one. This is something that not only fulfilled the scriptures, but had a very physical statement: Jesus was not trying to be the biggest and the baddest. Pilate entered on the other side of the city in a grand display of money and power, riding a huge horse that towered over everything. Using the lens that we've just talked about and seeing the crowds for who they've showed that they actually are, whose feet do you think they should be at? It seems a heck of a lot more like they would much rather be at the feet of someone who's obviously going to win. They were praising God because they thought He was going to do the God Thing and just take down all of Rome and be the winner. And they realized very quickly that that's not what God was doing. And in that instant, they turned on God because nobody wants to follow a loser God.

And now we see that all along they were the people who weren't actually on God's side, but just expected God to be on their side. It's easy to go along with it when God asks you to follow a donkey into the city. It's much more difficult to get on board when God asks you to follow Him to the cross. But, before we demonize them, let me tell you: their expectations were founded in history. Jerusalem was the city of power in Israelite history -- David, the greatest king of Israel ruled there, as did his son Solomon, who both brought a significant amount of prosperity, wealth, and power to Israel. When they look back on their history, they look at those two people and say, "if only we could get back to that, then we could make Israel great again." And so that means overthrowing Rome and being the winner. Just like David was the winner in his time. And just like Solomon was the winner in his time. This makes sense - they're logical conclusions to make based on their history. But. Jesus wasn't trying to be a new Pilate or even a new David. He wasn't trying to overthrow people because He was doing a totally new thing - a thing that is for *everyone*, not just the winners. It's almost like the Israelites are playing King of the Hill and they are super excited because they think Jesus is going to help them win, but in actuality He was playing His own game the whole time. He was not interested in knocking the king off the hill, but instead creating a kingdom where there were no hills.

For the crowds praising God, when they realized that God wasn't doing what they thought - that God wasn't on their side, they turned on Him and quickly became those calling for His death. So, what does it mean to say that God isn't on our side? Maybe it's better that He's not on our side, because as we can see with those crowds, there was even space in the kingdom for them as well. What if God is doing something so entirely different than we ever thought and we were so caught up in what we wanted and expected that we turned on God, too? That we joined in with the crowds shouting, "crucify him"?

If we're truly going to look at ourselves with our awkwardness lens and see if there's a gap there, then a part of that is asking ourselves what expectations we've put on God. Who do we expect God to be? Maybe you expect God to protect your loved ones. Maybe you expect God to help you have a child. Maybe you expect God to bring justice. Whatever they are, we need to be honest about our expectations, just like we have been this whole series.

Because honestly, a hard truth about God is that God doesn't always do what we expect. Even when those expectations feel right and true and good and beautiful. I can't tell you why God doesn't always meet those expectations. Sometimes we have the wrong set of expectations.

Maybe someone gave you those false expectations or maybe you made them for yourself. Maybe your expectations were placed correctly, but things didn't come to fruition because we live in a broken and sinful world. I can tell you why my expectations of the office were failed. That's an easy one. But, I can't tell you why some families can't have children. I can't tell you why God doesn't heal everyone, even when we pray really really hard. Or why some people are horrible and choose to hate people they don't even know. Or why bad things happen to good people. I can't tell you any of that. And this is where it gets more awkward. I'm the preacher. I'm supposed to have the answers.

Something I do know? God entered into our awkward. God got down in the dirt with us and had expectations and had them failed. He felt betrayal and He even became a God-forsaken person, when He cried out, "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And yet - Jesus became a God-forsaken person, and He went through betrayal and failed expectations, AND there was still redemption. God still redeems all things. Always.

So, what are the right expectations? What's the right answer? I don't have one for you. I can't tell you what the right expectations are, or what the right answer is. I can tell you, that we should be using the lens that we've been practicing this whole series to ask ourselves whether we want God to be on our side, or if we are willing to be on God's side. Are we willing to set down whatever expectations we have and step over to God's side, even if we have no idea what He's doing?

I can also tell you who I experience God to be. God is the one who is willing to go to the cross. So, if God is willing to enter into our awkward, isn't what it means to be willing to be on God's side being willing enter into that awkward as well? If God is willing to go to the cross for us, then isn't what it means to be on God's side to go to that cross with him?

And so, if we are willing, we'll practice all of the things that we've talked about this whole time - entering into awkward conversation, stepping into our growing edge, practicing empathy, etc. Because through the cross, through the awkward and hurt and pain of our failed expectations, is God, and God redeems all things, heals our hurts, and reconciles our failed expectations.

We are headed towards Easter, and that means going towards the cross, but ultimately that's good news for the crowds, and for Pilate, and for everyone in between.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide]

1. What expectations do you have of God right now?
2. How would you feel if those expectations didn't come to fruition?
3. What steps can you take this week to begin to step over to God's side, without those expectations?