

Disappointed

Telford Work, Westmont College

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Junior Class Chapel

Psalm 118:19-28, Mark 11:1-11, Romans 5:1-11.

My working hypothesis is that junior year feels like the seventh hour of a ten-hour flight. That might be a great feeling if you're flying first class; if you're flying coach and your legs are too long it's not a happy time, believe me. Either way, you are between big events.

One is way behind you now. The excitement of boarding the plane, waiting, and taking off is long past. The movie ended a while ago. The in-flight music is cycling for about the sixth time and played out. The small talk with your neighbors has run its course. Some are asleep. Some are passing the time with diversions.

The next big event is ahead, and coming closer. But it is far away enough not to be making much of an impact on you right now. Perhaps you are getting impatient to land. Perhaps you are dreading your arrival. Either way what is coming is making you more and more restless.

We could talk about restlessness today, but I would rather get ahead of the curve and talk about something that follows it: disappointment.

There is a lot of pent-up restlessness in the disciples and crowds as Jesus and his company come to the outskirts of Jerusalem. They are frustrated with their lousy puppet king and tired of Roman oppression. They know the promises of God, and they know those promises aren't being fulfilled. They are ready for some justice.

This Jesus dude looks like he might be bringing it. Compared to the scribes and Pharisees he has been showing real authority. His signs and wonders have been promising. He might be The One.

Mark reads something like a thriller. The narrative got off to a fast start but lately it has been, well, bogging down. We're in chapter 11 here – in the middle of junior year, so to speak. Readers – like the crowds, and perhaps like you – are ready for some action.

So the emotions are pouring out as he arrives at Jerusalem's east gate, and Jesus doesn't do anything to discourage them. He even has his people go out and find a donkey for him to ride into town on. Why? Because that is how Zechariah 9 said the king would arrive. Jesus is deliberately raising people's expectations.

They lay down coats and palm branches – that’s something you would do at the impromptu coronation of an anointed Jewish king (2 Kings 9:13) – and they shout out words from Psalm 118:

*Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the Lord.
This is the gate of the Lord;
the righteous shall enter through it.
I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.
The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.
This is the Lord’s doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.
This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.
Save us, we beseech you, O Lord!
O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.
We bless you from the house of the Lord.
The Lord is God,
and he has given us light.
Bind the festal procession with branches,
up to the horns of the altar. (Ps 118:19-27 NRSV).*

“Up to the horns of the altar”: That’s the temple the psalmist is talking about. And that is where Jesus is headed next. Bring it on!

Mark tells us what Jesus does next: He enters Jerusalem, and goes to the temple ... and looks around at everything ... and ... it’s getting late, so ... he leaves the city and spends the night with his disciples at Bethany.

What is Jesus thinking? He gets the crowds and the disciples all riled up, and goes right to where the inauguration is supposed to happen. He has the crowds’ attention; he has the disciples’ backing; he has the edge of surprise over the authorities. He has the momentum. And he just gives all this away for an early bedtime and a chance to curse a fig tree. You couldn’t

blame Jesus' fans for being disappointed – and his enemies for being encouraged. His strategy makes no sense.

Everyone that day has their own ideas of how things are supposed to go. Jesus' companions and audiences and opponents are all set – to rule Jerusalem at the Messiah's right hand, or to be emancipated from the Romans, or to finish off Jesus forever and snuff out his movement. In fact, they're ready for it to happen – or at least ready to take the risk. Their plans are finally falling into place. Thus the restlessness.

But Jesus gets in the way. When on Palm Sunday he just strolls around the temple and leaves, it is the beginning of a very frustrating week for everyone. Jesus refuses to play along with their plans. And he disappoints them.

Are *you* disappointed? I sense that a few of you are. Things in life were supposed to look differently than they have turned out. Maybe Judas Iscariot is your guy in this story. But there are others who aren't. They are still happy at Westmont, having a great college 'experience,' and so on – like Peter and James and John. Still others are restless to graduate or at least get off campus, tired of school after fifteen years of it, and more and more ready all the time to move on. Perhaps that's how Pontius Pilate feels after years of dealing with these uppity provincials when he would rather be living it up in Rome.

Over my third year of college, I was actually all three! I was tired of school and ready to get a life (and that took longer than I expected), *and* I was ready to graduate and continue along a path I had just begun traveling that I was sure would save the world (it didn't), *and* I was rather bitter about some of the shortcomings and unkept promises of my college education, as well as some of my own (rightfully, I still think).

Some of these people aren't disappointed – yet. But it's about to happen. And the ones who have are in for more. This is a point I want you to hear: *You will be disappointed*. You will be disappointed, again and again, whether or not you have ever been disappointed before. You will be disappointed whether you love Jesus or hate him, whether you are an optimist or a pessimist, whether you are lonely or loved, and whether people think of you as a great success or a terrible failure. You will be disappointed because you are too passionate and intelligent not to care about things, and because life's complexities and mysteries are deeper than you can fathom.

When disappointment happens, put it in perspective. You will find a lot of the right perspective in the stories of the Bible and the saints, because their people have been in the same place. Let's revisit Mark on Palm Sunday:

- Why is Judas disappointed? He seems to have been unhappy with the way Jesus pointed to himself. Why not the poor? Why not the disciples? (Why not Judas?)
- Why are Peter, James, and John disappointed? Their problem seems to have been Jesus' stress on the Son of Man suffering. That's not part of their messianic job description.
- Why are Israel's authorities and Pontius Pilate disappointed? When Jesus surrenders without a fight it robs them of the glory of a worthy opponent and turns their fear into contempt (Mark 14:65, 15:16-20). After the resurrection Jesus' movement won't go away even under persecution.

The gospels are rather quiet about what is going on in these people's minds. All you see is the effect that comes later: betrayal, abandonment, and crucifixion. This is true to life. When I am feeling disappointed about something, I magnify every little shortcoming and turn it into an earth-shaking event. Frustration colors every reaction and every action. Yet few seem to notice at first. It is as if I am shouting in space where no one can hear. And in a way, I am: I am living in

an interior world of my own where people intrude but don't really belong. Disappointment turns me into the tyrant of my own little psychological fiefdom. My neighbors, who aren't really part of that fiefdom, only see that I have become a little withdrawn, snarky, and uncooperative. What looks huge to me looks rather minor to them. They and I now live on opposite sides of a barrier I have constructed yet long to overcome: my own hardened heart.

As I have already said, this *will* happen to you. What then?

You have a lot of options. Rafe Esquith, a marvelous fifth-grade teacher in an inner-city school in Los Angeles, puts it this way:

When a person goes through a terrible experience [and he is speaking of himself], one of three things can happen. He can become embittered by it and be angry; can be defeated by it and be depressed; or can learn from it and grow. Growing from pain is definitely the hardest route to follow, and it is the one I chose. (Rafe Esquith, *There Are No Shortcuts*, Pantheon 2003, 92).

I don't recommend bitterness (the path of Jesus' adversaries). Nor do I recommend defeat and depression (the path of Judas Iscariot). Yes, learn and grow from it (the path of Peter, James, and John). However, I recommend that you do more. After all, Esquith sees part of the significance of disappointment, but the gospel shows us more. So – and at first this may make no sense at all – I recommend that you rejoice.

Rejoice!?! When my world is crashing down on me? Yep.

You see, disappointment forces a collision between your perception and the way things really are or can be. Only through that collision can things improve.

Several years ago I was so disappointed by the events that followed September 11 that I lost my faith. Now this is an unhappy event at any time, but it is especially painful when you are about to start a new job teaching theology! But I didn't surrender to defeat or bitterness. In the end I hung on by just opening the New Testament to find out whether the god I no longer believed in was actually the God of Jesus Christ. It turned out that while the two had a lot in

common, God as known in Scripture wasn't *quite* who I thought God was even after twenty years of walking with him and studying him.

Recently I have been disappointed in my profession, my family, others, my school, my family, and most of all myself. And I have certainly disappointed others. Over and over reality has intruded and forced a change.

However, this change is not simply learning and growing from disappointment. Let's go back to the gospel of Mark to see why. What is Jesus coming to Jerusalem to do?

They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; and they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. And taking the twelve again, he began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and deliver him to the Gentiles; and they will mock him, and spit upon him, and scourge him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise" (Mark 10:32-34).

This is right after the rich man turns away from Jesus and right before James and John ask to sit beside him in his glory. It is the third time Jesus has told his disciples, and they still don't get it. They and the crowds and the rulers *think* they understand why he is riding into Jerusalem and heading for the Temple, but they live in a world so thick with lies and illusions that they cannot help but misunderstand. When Jesus doesn't oblige their illusions – when he just looks around the temple area and leaves – the disconnect becomes intolerable, and they act on their disappointment.

And that is okay, since only the accomplishment of Jesus' mission will remove their misunderstanding. Jesus has to suffer the consequences of our dreams and fears in order to dispel those dreams and fears. Getting a clue is not something we can do on our own. There has to be a collision; the Son of Man has to suffer and rise again. The Father's strategy does not just solve the problem of our disappointment with God; it solves the much greater problem of God's disappointment with us.

Will you leave Westmont and languish in an unrewarding entry-level job, nursing those vain dreams of achieving greatness at the age of twenty-four? Will you leave the faith when someone hurts you and your youth-group Christianity doesn't offer a ready answer? Will you marry someone and come to wish you had married someone else? Will you have to work for an evil boss? Will you fail to get into the graduate school of your parents' dreams? Will the world still be hungry and violent and callous even though you are loving it with your work and your prayers? Will you put your trust in fellow Christians only to have them violate it? Will Jesus just stubbornly refuse to play along with you?

The answer is yes. All these things and more will happen to some of us here. I tell students that our twenties are the decade when God wrings out all of our ambition and false hope like water out of a towel. Then, when we're dry and stretched and limp, we can absorb again. (Enjoy that, by the way.)

It is nothing new. The apostle Paul faced a lot of disappointment. A lot of the New Testament is just Paul either putting out fires in his churches or being relieved that he doesn't have to. Yet listen to this assurance that he gives the Romans:

We rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and *hope does not disappoint us* (Romans 5:2-5).

Pay attention to that: it is hard-earned wisdom. Paul knows that all kinds of things will disappoint us. But *hope* doesn't disappoint us, because "while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his son, [and] much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life" (Romans 5:10). We have seen the Son of Man not just suffer but rise. All the disappointment that puts Jesus on the cross is undone after his resurrection, because we finally see that the future is secure even in the face of our failures to secure or even anticipate it.

Disappointment is the Spirit's invitation to be reconciled to the reality of the world as it now is and to be transformed into the reality of the world as God is remaking it.

Hope won't disappoint you, but just about everything else will. When it does, don't love Jesus less or hate him more. Don't flirt with pessimism or escape into false optimism. Don't withdraw into loneliness or run to others' lesser consolations. Don't set out to prove yourself and don't surrender to fear. Just repent and believe the good news. You are in good hands, and the future is better and surer than you have imagined. *Rejoice, learn, grow, and persevere.*