

Weekend of Sunday, April 7, 2019
5th Sunday in Lent/"People of the Passion"/Year C
Primary Text: Matthew 21:6-11
Sermon Title: "The Crowds"

Theme

*It could be argued that the common peasant Jew had as much to do with the crucifixion of Jesus as did any others. After all, they were the ones who cried out, "Crucify him!" Today we will look at what **the Jews** anticipated and wanted, misguided or not, and how Jesus did or did not meet their expectations.*

Text

⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

"Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

¹⁰When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?"

¹¹The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

Sermon

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we have made it to the Fifth Weekend of Lent! Next week is already Palm/Passion Sunday!

This week's installment in the sermon series, "People of the Passion," we will be looking at "The Crowds." And to begin, I would like to make a public apology. In my "Worship Notes" article in the "Monthly Edition of Eye On Zion," I wrote this about this week's sermon:

It could be argued that the common peasant Jew had as much to do with the crucifixion of Jesus as did any others. After all, they were the ones who cried out, "Crucify him!" Today we will look at what **the Jews** anticipated and wanted, misguided or not, and how Jesus did or did not meet their expectations.

And while what I wrote is true in a sense, I don't want to be guilty of anti-Semitism and lead you into thinking that "the Jews" are the ones who killed our Lord Jesus. That is an ancient accusation that Christians have had to deal with ever since the crucifixion. And I will say more about that as we go along.

The Gospel Reading I chose to use is Matthew's account of Jesus' triumphal procession into the holy city of Jerusalem on the Sunday before his crucifixion – an event we now call, Palm Sunday.

⁸A *very large crowd* spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹*The crowds* that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

"Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

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¹⁰When he entered Jerusalem, *the whole city was in turmoil*, asking, "Who is this?" ¹¹*The crowds* were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

All four gospels include a Palm Sunday story but the difference in Matthew's is revealing, and I think is likely more accurate about the attitudes that existed in

Jerusalem at that specific time. I have emphasized several words or phrases that Matthew alone included.

The first is from verse 8, "A very large crowd." This group of people were Jesus' groupies, his larger circle of disciples; people, both men and women, who were always with him. And also among the group were likely residents of Bethany, a village just a couple of miles from Jerusalem, who, according to John's Gospel, witnessed Jesus raising his friend Lazarus from the dead just days before. People are not raised from the dead even today, and so when the many mourners who went to the tomb of Lazarus with Jesus saw him raise Lazarus, it was quite a significant event, which only served to add to his acclaim.

And from verse 9 and 11, "the crowds." Who doesn't like a parade? This group of people were those who perhaps had heard the stories about Jesus and were also filled with hope that he just might be the long-awaited Messiah of God. Likely they heard all the fuss, heard that it was Jesus, and this was their opportunity to see him with their own eyes. At this point of the story, they were also his supporters and joined in the festive atmosphere.

Now, I am suggesting that all these people in "the crowds" were Jewish folks. Some were residents of Jerusalem and the surrounding territory, but because the high holy festival of Passover was later in the week, many Jews from far and wide had also come to the holy city to celebrate.

But in verse 10, I have emphasized another phrase; "the whole city was in turmoil." This indicates that though Jesus was certainly attracting a lot of attention, not everyone was happy about it. Among those not happy with the attention Jesus got were many of the groups we have talked about in previous weeks:

- the Romans – Pilate and his contingent of soldiers;
- Herod and his contingent of soldiers;
- the leaders and teachers of Israel – the priests, the Sanhedrin, the Sadducees and the Pharisees;
- and likely, they were other Jews who just wanted a peaceful life.

Matthew wrote that with

- the crowds of supporters Jesus had,
- and those who were tasked with keeping the peace,
- and those who didn't appreciate Jesus messing with the status quo,
- and those who just wished everyone could get along and get through the festival,

"¹⁰the whole city was in turmoil." And as I said in Second Weekend in Lent, this is not what Pilate and Herod wanted. Because of Jesus' presence, Jerusalem was powder keg.

Well, as I said, this was only Sunday. Depending on the Gospel source, Jesus spent the week:

- Cleansing the Temple,
- teaching in the Temple,
- being challenged by his adversaries,
- teaching his Disciples,
- foretelling his demise,
- and celebrating the Passover with the Twelve.

After the cleansing of the Temple, Mark's Gospel included the passage:

11:18"When the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching."

This indicates that while those who opposed him continued to get angrier and angrier and plot his execution, generally, the crowd still supported him.

But the last event I mentioned a moment ago was that Jesus celebrated the Passover with the Twelve, because it is immediately after that, that things turned badly for Jesus.

Of course, Judas had already made his evil deal with the high priests, so he left Jesus and the rest to go carry out the plan that had been plotted.

Jesus led the Eleven out to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray and while he was out there, the betrayal took place.

The Gospels differ slightly on who the arresting party was, but it was still those who had always been his adversaries; the chief priests and the Sanhedrin along with the Temple police. Still, none of "the crowd" of common Jewish folks.

But immediately thereafter, from those who tried to associate Peter with Jesus leading to his denial and beyond, Jesus' adversaries worked the crowd to convert them from hopeful spellbound admirer's to a mob that would call for his crucifixion!

How could this happen, you ask? The Gospels are not all that clear but what is included is that his adversaries

- told lies about Jesus and his ministry of teaching and preaching;
- they took things he said out of context and used them against him;
- They, in a sense, tried to force him to *put up or shut up*, and when he didn't demonstrate any divine Messianic power, the crowd began to see him as a fraud, not kingly material, and certainly not the Messiah – at least not the kind of Messiah they had in mind.

He stood there on Pilate's porch, before the crowd made up of his adversaries and those who had previously waved palm branches and shouted Hosanna, and called him the Son of David, and King. But then, he was humiliated, badly beaten, blood streamed down his face under the crown of thorns. A purple robe had been put on him and while purple was considered the color of royalty, on him it was a joke.

With the encouragement of his adversaries, the crowd's disappointment quickly turned to anger and they called for his crucifixion! "Crucify him. Crucify Him."

How could this happen, you ask?

We, human beings, are a strange lot. Sociologist and psychologist have names for it: Mob, herd, and crowd mentality; mass hysteria.

In colonial Salem, Massachusetts, a teenage girl by the name of Elizabeth Hubbard was accused of being a witch, and then over the course of the next year and a half, a total of nineteen were found guilty of witchcraft and hanged. Ancient history you say?

After Germany's humiliating defeat in the First World War, Hitler and the Nazi party used Germany's frustration and anger over the state of the nation to blame the Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and others. We human beings love to blame someone else for our problems. Ancient history you say?

Between the years of 1992 and 1995, 200,000 people were killed in the former Yugoslavia. And in 1994, 800,000 people were killed in ethnic cleansing in Rwanda.

Right now, the Rohingya people, a stateless Indo-Aryan group, struggles for survival in refugee camps in Bangladesh. They traditionally are from Myanmar, but in 2016 and following they have been persecuted and denied citizenship in their own country, and forced to flee to Bangladesh. If you don't know what I am talking about, then blame that on the American media, for avoiding talking about it. We don't really want to know about that problem way over there.

We, human beings, are a strange lot. We cannot sit here in the year 2019 and scratch our heads wondering how 2000 years ago, a crowd of admirers could turn into a mob calling for Jesus' death. We have proven our capacity for evil.

And God revealed in Jesus Christ knew it then, and knows it now, and in Christ, forgives us on the cross of Calvary.

Sing with me please.

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Prayer

The Rev. Duane A. Jesse, Senior Pastor
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O God of mercy, the answer to the question, "were we there?" is no, we personally weren't physically there at that time and place, but we cannot say for certain what we would have done had we have been there. But we, your created human beings were there, and we continue to demonstrate a propensity for evil against each other and your whole creation, which is an offense against you. Gather us around the cross of Christ, touch us with the story of your great love, and never give up on us. Continue to send us your Holy Spirit that we might continue to learn your ways of love and justice, and live according to them. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen