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Choosing your Crowd

Mark 11:1-11, Mark 14:53-15:25

What is the biggest crowd you have ever been in? I think for me it was the time I went to the Fourth of July celebration in Washington DC which regularly brings 750,000 people to watch the fireworks together. Maybe you have been in Times Square on New Year's Eve or to a big sporting event or maybe you have marched in a protest somewhere that drew in a lot of people.

It can be a lot of fun to be at a parade or a concert or a baseball game and feel the joy of a crowd. It is inspiring to feel like you are sharing something altogether; to feel you have something in common. Some of my favorite memories are in a big crowd or crowded place.

But I also feel differently about crowds now and I imagine many of you do too. For one, since covid, the idea of being smushed in with lots of other people can feel claustrophobic and make me worry about germs. And secondly, I think many of us now have at least a low-level concern about being in a crowd with someone with a weapon because of the ubiquity of mass shootings. We all know the mood of a crowd can shift suddenly bringing about stampedes or dangerous situations. We have seen crowds get whipped up into a frenzy. And in our current political climate, we are all too aware of how quickly a crowd can become a mob.

Preacher John Buchanan said, "There is a fine and fragile line between a crowd and a mob. Given the right conditions—fear is an important ingredient, as are resentment and a sense of powerlessness and victimization; add in a misplaced patriotism and paranoia and finally a little religion—anger becomes rage. And rage, like fire, feeds on itself, and a crowd becomes a mob, and people, in the heat of the moment, say things and do things they would never say or do individually. It is called mob psychology, and ...it can quickly turn violent and murderous."

Our scripture today shows just how true this is. On Sunday, a crowd gathered and was thrilled to see Jesus – praising him and singing hosannas. But by Friday, that

same crowd yelled at the top of their lungs, “Crucify him, crucify him.” The crowd became a mob.

Why did they go from cheering crowd to mob so quickly? Let us look more closely. On Sunday, when they yelled out hosanna, what they were saying was “save us.” Save us, Jesus. Which begs the question: save us from what? What did the crowd want saving from? To answer that, we must first know who this crowd is.

One thing we know is that the crowd gathered around Jesus that Sunday were people who had chosen to be witnesses of Jesus’ parade entering the city instead of going to the other parade in town. On the other side of town, Pilate was riding in on war horses with gleaming armor and a good portion of the Roman army all arriving along with the Jews who were making their pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Remember the Passover is the holiday that retells the story of the Jews escaping from their Egyptian enslavers. So, Pilate and the army were there to make sure no one got any ideas about revolution or rebellion. Which means the people who gathered to see Jesus’ parade instead of going to Pilate’s parade were likely people who were tired of Roman rule, tired of political and religious oppression, tired of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer, tired of having no power and living in fear. These were people ready for a bit of revolution.

The crowd had something very real in mind when they yelled out “save us, Jesus.” The Jewish people would have been familiar with the story from the prophet Zechariah in the Old Testament which talks about a king who will ride in on a donkey and bring about a revolution that creates peace for all nations. The people lining the parade route thought they were cheering for the man who was going to bring about a revolution. And there was just one way revolutions looked back then under Caesar – bloody. They expected Jesus to declare war and crush his enemies. They shouted for him with the anticipation of the death of those who had oppressed them. This would be revenge for all they had suffered.

Ultimately, they were susceptible to the same old contradiction that humanity has struggled with in every age – the belief that there must be war to bring peace. (Which you would think we would have given up on by now, seeing as how war does not ever seem to bring peace, occasionally something temporary, but never lasting peace.) Our world is not all that different. Crowds today are just as likely to call our own versions of “save us” with some kind of war or violence in mind. But that was not what Jesus was doing. That is not God’s way.

This Lent, we have heard about God's way, God's covenant. The rainbow as a sign of the lesson God learned – that violence and destruction is not the answer and so God makes a covenant to never destroy again. The promise of countless generations of Abraham's descendants, represented by the stars, with whom God wants to live in partnership. The tablets of stone with the ten commandments telling us how we can live in peace with God and one another. The snakes which remind us God is a God who is always working to bring life out of death, peace out of conflict, love out of hate.

And last week, the covenant God promised to write on our hearts so we will not need to make blood sacrifices or must go to a temple to encounter God or require a priest to intercede for us. The covenant on our hearts is one that allows us to know the peace of God in the very center of our being.

And now, God sends Jesus, the man meant to show us what all these covenants look like when they are embodied. If Jesus is who we proclaim him to be, then there is no question, Jesus could have used his power to subdue and oppress; could have stepped into the role of King and had all the riches of the world; could have been the one to overthrow the Romans once and for all. But he did not because Jesus did not come to start a one-time coup of the Roman army. He did not come to affirm the idea that war brings peace. He did not come to rule over one kingdom in the 1st century – to be a footnote in our history books. Jesus came to transform the way we think of rulers and kingdoms; to transform how we understand what real power and real peace look like.

Which means we, who might like to cry out “save us” from all the troubles and sufferings of the world, have to ask: What does it mean to proclaim a God who refuses to use strength and force; a God who will forgive those who betray him; a Savior who would die rather than participate in violence; a God for whom death does not have the last word; a God who will not abandon us even when we abandon God; a God who says the love we have for each other is what matters, not power or money or fame?

We know we are meant to want that kind of God, but let's be clear and honest – that God is not an easy God to follow. The way of empire and power feels safer and usually allows for a lot of tempting material comforts. Empire gives those in power the ability to live in a delusion of their superiority. Empire allows those in power to believe things like war, oppression, and poverty are unfortunate but necessary side effects of living in the world. Empire creates a powerful illusion of security. Empire offers quick fixes and short-term solutions that make us feel good.

The same honesty means we must conclude that the way of Jesus is humbling and hard. The way of Jesus requires sacrifice. The way of Jesus calls us to live lives of true humility instead of following our pride. The way of Jesus knows we will not be exempt from suffering and struggle. The way of Jesus requires long term vision and solutions that we may never live to see the results of.

In this holy week, many people prefer to go from the triumphant parade to the joyful resurrection, skipping over Jesus' righteous anger when he over turned over the tables in the temple and the betrayal of all his friends and his agonizing pleading with God in the garden and the crowd turning into the mob that calls for his crucifixion, the shame and ostracizing of the soldiers and finally, the torture of the cross.

But, during holy week, we are meant to see ourselves in the crowd. To know that we are no different from the disciples who abandoned Jesus or the mob who was so desperate for saving that they called for blood. But Jesus came to show us a different way - a way of partnership and covenant, a way of justice, love and compassion, a way which will put us apart from the crowd. A way that transforms the mobs of our day and reinforces that war and destruction will never be the answer. A way to trust in the promise that no matter what may happen in this life, we are always loved, always held - that God will continue to work to bring life out of death and true peace to all the earth. And next Sunday, we will see how this difficult path also allows for a life of redemption and how partnering with God can resurrect our deepest struggles into joy we could not have imagined alone.