

April 2nd, 2023
Palm Sunday

Matthew 21:1-11 “Where Are You Headed?”

Okay, it's preacher confession time. I have a complicated relationship with the New Common Lectionary. Every Sunday I get more or less four choices for scripture readings. I get an Old Testament reading, a Gospel reading, another passage from the New Testament, and a Psalm. It's all laid out in a three-year cycle – A, B, and C. We're in Year A. Theoretically, a preacher can take a congregation through all the major themes and narratives in the Bible in 12 years. I like following the lectionary because it helps me stay out of ruts. The downside of preaching from the lectionary is that there are about four or five Sundays each year where you deal with the same scripture or story every year. Palm Sunday and Easter are two examples of this. You don't have much choice in the matter - even less so this week because the lectionary only gave me two choices – a passage out of Psalm 118 and Matthew's version of Palm Sunday. That's it. Granted, we get a different gospel writer's take on the situation every year, but every year the Sunday before Easter is always Palm Sunday. Every year we get the same story with different details. For some of you, this will be the 15th Palm Sunday sermon that you'll hear from me and the fifth one from Matthew's gospel. And yes, sometimes there's a little devil on my shoulder who says, “Hey preacher, you ever thought about just pulling one of your old sermons out of a file and using that? C'mon man. No one will notice.” But just like the sticker on Mary's water bottle says, “Not today, Satan.” Why? Because this story is packed with possibility.

But before we move forward, I want to remind you about something we talked about last year regarding Jesus' final entry into Jerusalem. This was not a spontaneous parade that sort of “popped up” by surprise. Sometimes we think Jesus just kind of rolled up into town unannounced and a bunch of people saw him and said, “Hey, it's Jesus, let's have a parade!” and they just grabbed whatever they could and boom ... it happened. And sometimes that's how we present this story, but it

wasn't the case. Last year I compared it to how Rosa Parks wasn't just some random lady on a bus who inadvertently launched the civil rights movement because she was tired and didn't want to move to the back of the bus. There was a lot of people involved and there was a lot of planning and preparation that happened ahead of time. Same with Palm Sunday. There was a lot of planning that went into this event too and everything that happened had a very specific meaning.

I'm happy that this year's Palm Sunday gospel is from Matthew. We started the year out working through Matthew in Bible study, and for those of you who were able to come to that, we learned two very important things about Matthew's gospel. First off, it's written for a Jewish community and the primary message is, "This guy Jesus? He's the Messiah you've been looking for." And secondly, everything in Matthew's gospel points to how God's Kingdom is the polar opposite of the Kingdoms of the Earth. This parade into Jerusalem was deliberately designed to make that contrast crystal clear. Warren Carter in his book *Matthew in the Margins* compared Palm Sunday to "choreographed street theater" because Jesus was mocking the Roman *triumphus*, which was the processional parade that Roman leaders would use when they conquered a city. In the triumphus, a Roman general, crowned with laurels, would stage a grand procession into the city through the main gates. The general would ride in a chariot pulled by a white horse surrounded by the troops who occupied the city. Then he would declare martial law and round up crowds of people who were expected to sing songs of praise to Rome and to shout acclamations to the victor. Then the rulers of the city would be brought in and forced to give testimonies about how grateful they were for Caesar and how Caesar had saved them. Then the general would go to whatever shrine or temple was in the city and make a sacrifice. This was the way.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, he came in through the back gate riding a donkey, not a chariot. He wasn't crowned with laurels although later he would wear a crown of thorns at his execution. He would weep over Jerusalem, not celebrate it. The crowds who gathered that day were

there of their own free will and they sang hymns and shouted “hosanna,” which means “save us.” And they *meant* it. They weren’t being forced to do this. Because this guy Jesus? He was the messiah they’d been looking for. Finally, Jesus went to the temple, but rather than participating in what had become a tired and oppressive sacrificial system, he drove out the ones responsible for corrupting it. This was a deliberate act of protest that mocked the political and religious leaders’ corruption. This was also the last straw for those corrupt leaders and this act of protest is what led to Jesus’ arrest, trial, and crucifixion. Thus begins holy week.

Our theme for Lenten Season this year is: “Seeking: Honest Questions for Deeper Faith.” Our task is to discover the questions that are here in this passage of scripture so that it will lead us to a deeper, richer faith. The question I want to put on the table this morning is, “Who are we following?” And you may be thinking, “Oh come on pastor, that’s kind of obvious don’t you think? I mean, we’re following Christ. We’re the Christian Church ... we’re the Disciples of Christ.” Yes, that is what we are called. But is it who we are? See, I want to focus on the crowds this year. I want to compare the one that gathered at the back gate with the one that gathered at Jesus’ trial. Those of you who have heard 15 Palm Sunday sermons from me may be thinking, “Oh, this is going to be ‘the same crowd who greeted Jesus on Palm Sunday were the same ones calling for his crucifixion a week later’ sermon.” And you know what, I probably have preached that sermon. I know I’ve heard that sermon quite a bit in my 40 years of following Jesus. That’s the sermon where we are asked to think about how fickle we are when it comes to our dedication to Jesus. And that’s fine. I’m kind of heading in that direction this morning. But ... the beauty of studying scripture and reading the stories of the Bible again and again, is that every now and then you have an “ah-hah” moment that encourages you to re-consider how you interpret a particular passage. That’s why I encourage you to invest in a study Bible and to read commentaries. It’s good to see what the Bible scholars have to say. A while ago, I ran across something that challenged the traditional “fickle crowd” interpretation of the Palm

Sunday story. Why do we think that the crowd at Jesus' trial and was the same as the crowd who gathered on Palm Sunday? Maybe it's because we think that Jerusalem was a small town and that people didn't really have anything better to do than wander around looking for entertainment. One week you and your friends might be wandering around town and you stumble across Jesus coming in through the back gate of Jerusalem. "Hey, looks like a parade! Wanna go watch? Sure! Everyone is cheering. Well, maybe we should cheer too! Hooray! Go Jesus!" Then a week later, you and your friends are out wandering around again and you stumble across a trial. "Hey, isn't that the same guy who they had a parade for last week? Looks like he's on trial today. Huh ... everyone is boo-ing and calling for his crucifixion. Maybe we should too. Boo! Crucify him!" Again, it's not an *impossible* scenario and we humans *can* be that fickle, but it just doesn't sound very likely.

The more plausible scenario is that the people who were gathered at the back gate of Jerusalem were already pro-Jesus, and the people at his trial a week later were already anti-Jesus. Sure, there may have been some people who were at both events, but it makes more sense that the majority of those gathered on Palm Sunday were folks who had already made up their minds that Jesus was the messiah they'd been looking for and the people who were at his trial were mostly folks who already made up their minds that Jesus was a false messiah.

Now let's go back to the question we have on the table this morning – "Who are we following?" Maybe the better question is, "Who is our crowd?" On Palm Sunday, nobody in that crowd was being forced to do anything. This crowd was made up of people whose lives had been touched by Jesus and who were willing participants in an act of peaceful protest. They were firm in their faith in Jesus and that he was the messiah they'd been looking for.

Let's compare that to the crowd at Jesus' trial. In that scene, there were exceedingly religious people there. These leaders had already made up their minds that Jesus was a threat to status quo that the corrupt religious

leaders and corrupt government officials had put together over the years when Rome occupied that territory. Jesus was rocking the boat, and if he didn't stop rocking the boat, these religious elites might lose their status, their influence, and the creature comforts they had grown accustomed to. Jesus was on trial for treason and sedition. In Matthew 27:15-18, the gospel writer explained an old tradition that happened on Passover-

“Now at the festival the governor, Pontius Pilate, was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, ‘Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?’ For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they, the religious leaders, had handed him over.”

Then in verse 20, Matthew writes, “The chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed.” This crowd was easily manipulated by those corrupt religious leaders, and it ended with Jesus being crucified.

So again, I ask, “Who is our crowd?” Are we a part of the crowd that has grown comfortable with the unholy marriage of corrupt government and corrupt religion? Do we just want a messiah who will bless the current status quo? Do we want Jesus to be someone who conforms to our beliefs, or are we willing to let God conform us so that we can carry on our mission and witness for Christ? That's the question I want you to ponder this week. And ... I want you to read through the rest of Matthew's gospel because sometimes we come to church on Palm Sunday waving our palms and shouting hosannah, then we come back the next week and celebrate the resurrection without exploring the tragedy of Jesus' trial and execution. So ... I hope to see you on Thursday night for Maundy Thursday service where we'll talk about what led to Jesus' betrayal, but again ... since we don't have a Good Friday service or a Holy Saturday vigil, I'd encourage you to read the

whole story. Maybe it will help you discover which crowd you've been following and more importantly which crowd you need to be following.