

March 28, 2021
Mark 11:1-11, 15:1-47

Sunday of the Passion/Palm Sunday
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Turning from the Crowd”

“Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself and come down from the cross!”

A conductor needs to turn her back to the crowd to conduct an orchestra.

It is not a sign of disrespect when the conductor turns toward the musicians; it is a matter of focusing on the task at hand, leading the ensemble in the concert that they are presenting. While the audience plays an important role in the performance (a fact that has become apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic), when it is time for the concert to begin the conductor’s back needs to be turned away from the audience so that the focus might be on what is important.

The crowds play an important role in the gospel story of our Lord Jesus Christ. He often finds himself amid crowds throughout his ministry; his teaching, preaching, and healing takes place amid great crowds who gather around the man from Nazareth. While there are moments when he leaves the crowds for times of rest and reflection, he always returns to the crowds because he was sent to be the Saviour of all people. When his disciples want to turn the crowds away so that they might go and find food from themselves, Jesus refuses to comply with this request; instead, he suggests to them that *“you give them something to eat”* (Mark 6:37), the occasion for Jesus’ miraculous feeding of the five thousand. As we heard in last Sunday’s Gospel lesson, Jesus’ mission will only be complete *“when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself”* (John 12:32).

Jesus is once again amid crowds in both of today’s Gospel lessons on this Sunday in which we celebrate his entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and remember his death on the Cross at Golgotha on Good Friday. He meets the first crowd on the day when he is to enter Jerusalem to begin this most important week in Jesus’ life and in the life of those who are baptized in his name. Jesus and his disciples approach Jerusalem *“at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives”* (Mark 11:1). The setting on the Mount of Olives is important, for according to Zechariah 14:4 *“on that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives,”* and their messianic hopes are focused when *“the LORD will become king over all the earth; on that day the LORD will be one and his name one.”* (14:9). Jesus instructs two of his disciples to *“go into the village ahead*

of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it to me” (11:2). Roman soldiers routinely requisitioned animal and human labour from the populace; Jesus’ promise that he will “send it back immediately” (11:3) distinguishes him from the ruling forces.

When the disciples find the colt and bring it to Jesus, *“they threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields” (11:7-8). Spreading cloaks out before a king to walk on recalls the account of Jehu’s ascension to the throne in 2 Kings 9:13: “Then hurriedly they all took their cloaks and spread them for him on the bare steps; and they blew the trumpet, and proclaimed, ‘Jehu is king.’”* The crowd also cuts “leafy branches” in the fields and uses them along with their garments to cover the road along which Jesus rides, a sign of welcoming respect for a dignitary so the dust of the road might not soil his garments as he enters the city. The branches (only John refers to them as “palms”) also recall the conquering of Jerusalem by Simon Maccabeus: *“the Jews entered it with praise and palm branches, and with harps and cymbals and stringed instruments, and with hymns and songs, because a great enemy had been crushed and removed from Israel” (1 Maccabees 13:51).* The crowds who great him with this sign of respect also shout words of welcome and celebration: *“Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” (11:9-10).* The crowd’s acclamation combines two pilgrimage psalms that travelers would have sung as they were making their journey toward the Holy City:

- “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD” – Psalm 118:26a
- “Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights!” – Psalm 148:1.

Psalm 118 was part of the liturgy of the Jewish celebration of the Passover seder, where reciting the *Hallel* follows the drinking of the third cup of wine; this is the meal that Jesus will share with his disciples in the Upper Room on the coming Thursday, *“the night in which he was betrayed” (1 Corinthians 11:23).*

Jesus makes no response to the crowd’s cries of welcome and rejoicing; all that Mark records is that *“he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.” (11:11).* His entry into Jerusalem was triumphal only for Jesus’ followers who have not yet understood his destiny as the Son of Man, which he had divulged to his disciples from the moment he revealed his messianic identity (*“Then he began*

to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” – 8:31). For Jesus, the purpose of his entry into Jerusalem is clear: it is an entry into suffering and death.

- “He enters Jerusalem as a pilgrim, and as more than a pilgrim. He makes no response to a royal acclamation, but his silence seems to suggest, ‘I am Messiah, and I will save; but not as you expect’ ... He is no less king than their words suggest, but his kingdom is other and more than they dare to think.” – Lamar Williamson, Jr.

Jesus turns his back on the crowds who welcoming him triumphantly into Jerusalem so that he might focus on his mission, the purpose for which he has entered the city. His task is to focus on fulfilling God’s Will to free God’s people from “*sin, death, and the power of the devil,*” which will only be accomplished when Christ “*humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross*” (Philippians 2:8).

- “Not that Jesus’ mission per se is to die. Rather, Jesus knows that his unbridled approach to human wholeness has proved too disruptive and offensive for those wielding power. Jesus chooses death because toning down God’s love – to avoid death – is not an option for the Messiah. Jesus can only love at full speed. And Jesus knows that this same love will overcome death itself. This is not your normal power-wielding, army-raising king.” – Ira Brent Driggers.

Jesus will confront another crowd upon whom he will also need to turn his back to fulfill his divine purpose. In the Passion According to St. Mark, the Evangelist fills in the narrative time between the nailing of Jesus to the Cross and his death with an expanded account of Jesus’ being mocked by onlookers:

- “Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, ‘Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!’ In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, ‘He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.’ Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.” – 15:29-32.

The taunting of the crowds reminds readers of the earlier mocking of Jesus by the Romans soldiers who “*struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him*” (15:19). Mark has arranged the taunting so that everyone rejects Jesus. Those who happen to pass by shake their heads at him, reminiscent of the words of Psalm 22:7: “*All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads.*” The crowds repeat the false charge that Jesus had promised to destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days, echoing the testimony of false witnesses in the Sanhedrin trial (“*We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.’*” – 14:58). Members of the Sanhedrin participate in the mockery by renewing the challenge to Jesus to save himself and add the peculiar charges that they had formulated to serve as grounds for execution, that Jesus has claimed that he was the “*Messiah, King of Israel.*” They taunt Jesus with the challenge to save himself from the Cross by claiming that if he did so they “*would see and believe,*” a remark filled with vicious sarcasm. Even the men who are being crucified alongside Jesus join in the taunting; there is no account in Mark of one of the condemned men asking Jesus to “*remember me when you come into your kingdom*” (Luke 23:42). In the hour of his death, Jesus is truly the Suffering Servant of whom Isaiah speaks: “*He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.*” (Isaiah 53:3).

In the space of a few days, Jesus has confronted crowds who both welcome him and despise him, onlookers who celebrate his entry into Jerusalem as a conquering hero and bystanders who add to his suffering by taunting him and tempting him to abandon his divine mission for his own selfish gains – placing themselves in the position that Satan took in the temptation in the wilderness. Mark presents us with the stark reality of human agency, the capacity of human beings to praise a person at one moment and call for their death at another.

- “More than anything, Mark simply wants us to see the human capacity both for coming to Jesus and for killing him. On the one hand, mostly in the first half of the narrative, we see crowds of people repeatedly drawn to his ministry. He heals the infirm and welcomes sinners, bringing human wholeness without regard for approved methods and timing. On the other hand, Jesus’ indifference to approval provokes the ire of those claiming authority to approve and condemn. In Mark 15, this animosity finally turns deadly.” – Driggers.

Jesus hears both the shouts of praise and cries of derision from the crowds during Holy Week; but he turns his back on these ambiguous shouts so that he might accomplish his purpose of suffering and dying *“for us and for our salvation.”* From the moment that *“he set his face to go to Jerusalem”* (Luke 9:51), Jesus turns his back on the crowds that would laud him one minute and taunt him the next, because his purpose is to turn his back on the crowds so that he might turn his face to Jerusalem, to his death on the Cross and his glorious resurrection on Easter Day, so that all who believe in him – even the crowds who mocked and taunted him – might live in confidence that *“if we are united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his”* (Romans 6:5). Jesus sets his face toward his mission in Jerusalem so that *“I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true.”* (Small Catechism).

- “Jesus did not die in order to spare us the indignities of the wounded creation. He died that we might see those wounds as our own. He died that we might live, and live fully and hopefully – please note the correct use of the adverb ‘hopefully’ as ‘full of hope’ – not in some fantastic never-never-land not yet arrived, but in ambiguous reality here and now. Look at the cross and the suffering, bleeding Savior. Beyond tragedy is truth redeemed. Look and live!” – Peter Gomes.

The conductor turns her back on the audience so that the audience might be blessed by the performance to which the conductor gives her full attention. Jesus turns his back on the crowds that both cheer and taunt him so that he might fulfill his mission, accomplishing the will of the God who so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that through focusing on his death and resurrection all who believe in him – including that crowd at Golgotha – might not perish but have eternal life. Jesus turns from the crowd so that by turning toward Jesus the crowd – all people – might receive the blessings of *“forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation”* that are for all people through our crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.