

The Crowd and the Witnesses
a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, April 14, 2019
based on John 12:12–15; Matthew 21:8–9; Acts 1:6–8

Today we will consider the story of Palm Sunday from the vantage point of one of the primary actors in the story—the crowd. {prayer}

The story of Palm Sunday is one of the most familiar stories in the gospels, but it is seldom fully understood. The story is of such importance that it is reported in all four gospels. Each gospel recounts the same basic event, but tells the story a little differently, and mentions different details, which is exactly what you would and should expect from four different witnesses of the same event. None of the gospels specifically mentions children in connection with Palm Sunday; but they all say, in one way or another, that there was a large crowd [*A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees Matt. 21:8*], so we naturally imagine there must have been children among it. We like to feature children on Palm Sunday—at the 10:30 hour they carry palms into the sanctuary—because it helps the children identify with the story, and for the whole congregation it adds to a feeling of joy and innocence. We like to think of Palm Sunday as a bright and shining celebration before the dark clouds of the coming crucifixion — a day of acclaiming Jesus as Lord.

The first Palm Sunday certainly did have a spiritual dimension, as people recognized that God was working in Jesus. But to really understand the original Palm Sunday, you have to understand that more than anything, this was a political crowd. When the people acclaimed Jesus as king, they were not thinking, as we do, of a spiritual king. [*“Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel” John 12:13*] They were thinking of a king like David—a king who would literally reign in Jerusalem, and who, like David, would crush their enemies. They repeatedly acclaimed Jesus as “the Son of David.” [*“Hosanna to the Son of David” Matthew 21:9*] And when they shouted “Hosanna,” which in Hebrew means “save now,” they were not looking foremost for a spiritual salvation; they were looking for a deliverance from their earthly enemies, specifically, from the power of Rome.

In 63 B.C., Pompey the Great, a Roman general, conquered Jerusalem, and brought the entire Holy Land under Roman rule. For a century prior to that, the Jewish people in the Holy Land had had an independent republic. It began with a revolt in the 160s B.C., when revolutionary forces led by Judas Maccabeus threw off the Greek rule that had long oppressed the Jewish people. His victory was celebrated at the time by crowds waving palm branches, a sign of victory; and subsequently the Maccabean rulers stamped the image of a palm tree on the coins of that independent state.

So when the people waved palm branches at the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem, this was not the innocence of children grabbing something fun to wave in celebration. This

was an intentional political symbol. Waving a palm branch at that moment was like waving a flag of independence; it was a clear political banner.

To understand the dynamics, therefore, of the original Palm Sunday crowd, you need to think not so much of a congregation at a church service but more of the crowd at a political rally. Think of a Donald Trump rally, or a Bernie Sanders rally. You might rather not be at either; but set aside political allegiances for a moment, and just think about the crowd at a political rally. The crowd is excited and full of energy. When the leader who is the focus of everyone's attention enters, there is rejoicing and waving of flags or signs. People shout slogans. They are jubilant, and they look with expectation for what the leader will promise.

It is interesting to observe how closely the original Palm Sunday crowd parallels the political rally crowd of today, but once we see that, we are brought to a sobering realization; for while there is similarity in the crowds, there is an enormous difference in the leaders being acclaimed, and there is a great divergence in how the crowd in each case ultimately acts.

Today, our political leaders are always flawed. The longer we know them the more flawed they turn out to be; but this does not seem to dissuade the crowd. When one rally is long over, another one happens, and the crowd is back, with enthusiasm unabated. The political crowd sticks with the leader, gathering again and again, continuing to cheer.

At the original Palm Sunday, the leader who was the focus of attention was blameless. Jesus was the Son of God, embodying moral perfection. But after one day of cheering, the crowd turned. Within a few days, the crowd had either vanished or had decided against Jesus, so that just five days after Palm Sunday there was a crowd shouting "Crucify." It all goes to show that if you are following the crowd you are probably in the wrong place.

The behavior of the crowd during Holy Week can only be understood by comprehending the nature of political crowds. At a political rally, people especially get charged up when the leader promises two basic things. First, the leader promises to defeat the enemy, however the enemy is defined. The enemy today might be those capitalists on Wall Street, or it might be the socialist left, or the enemy might be some set of outsiders, or it might even be the news media or it might be some foreign adversary. The political leader whips up sentiment against the enemy, and then promises, as a second crucial point, that with the downfall or expulsion of the enemy, life for the crowd will become better and easier. People love this sort of message—the promise that our enemies will get what is coming to them, and we finally will get good things.

But Jesus proclaimed exactly the opposite of this. In first century Judea, the broad expectation was that when the Messiah came, the Messiah would take it to the Romans, destroying their rule, and the Messiah would restore the lost glory of ancient Israel. If there had been baseball caps in the first century, someone could have done a brisk

business on Palm Sunday by selling hats that said, “Make Israel great again.” That was exactly what people lining the streets were looking for the Messiah to do.

But after Jesus entered Jerusalem, instead of rallying the nation against Rome, he leveled his critique at the Jewish leadership, lambasting the scribes and the Pharisees for their hypocrisy. When he entered the temple, instead of honoring that hallowed place of Jewish worship, he overturned the tables in the temple court, creating complete chaos. He said scarcely a word about Roman rule, but called people to love their enemies. At the same time, he promised to his followers not an easy path ahead but a hard one. He called people to “take up their cross”—which, if it meant anything, meant personal sacrifice. None of this was what people wanted to hear, and they turned against him.

So much for the crowd. As the story in the New Testament continues through the crucifixion, and then the resurrection, and then the sending of disciples to be witnesses for Jesus to the world, crowds no longer play much of a role. The only positive story about a crowd is on Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit comes with power on the disciples, and 3000 people come to Christian faith, although that was a very small percentage of the huge crowd that had gathered in Jerusalem that day for a Jewish festival. Mostly, as the story of the early church develops through the book of Acts, whenever we hear of a crowd, it is an angry crowd chasing after the apostles, infuriated about the Christian message. Again, a crowd is rarely a repository of truth.

Instead, truth is advanced in New Testament days on a small scale. As the gospel spreads, it happens not by means of big rallies or crowds but as believers such as Peter or Paul share their faith among a few people. Early churches were so small they met in people’s homes. Yet as small and inconsequential as that may seem, the overall impact of the spread of the gospel was world-changing.

Today it continues to be the case that the gospel is most effectively shared on a small scale, as individuals bear witness to their faith to a few people. It is significant that most church worship services in our time are relatively small gatherings. The only churches today that have massive crowds are, interestingly enough, churches that proclaim that ever popular message that God is going to make life nice and easy and give you everything that you want. Churches that proclaim an authentic gospel message, which contains much more of a challenge, have smaller crowds. Yet for the early church, it was precisely on that level of the small that the gospel spread tremendously.

In that vein, we are going to begin today an element in our worship services of having personal testimonies from members of our church about how God has been at work in their life. We will not be doing this each week; this will be an occasional item, as the worship schedule allows, but it will add an additional personal element to our worship experience.

In light of the recent General Conference of the United Methodist Church, and its highly controversial decision to hold to an official stance that is not fully welcoming

toward LGBT persons, our first testimonies will be from LGBT persons, or members of their families. It is our way of saying that whatever the official United Methodist stance may be, our church in Kent is fully inclusive. Our Church Council this past week explicitly affirmed using these testimonies as one way of expressing our open and welcoming attitude as a church. As most of you know, I just recently completed a sermon series on what the Bible actually says about human sexuality—you can get the sermons online if you missed them—but when we hear a personal testimony, it is a wonderful reminder that we are not just talking about abstract concepts; we are talking about real people and real life experience. Our first testimony comes from Brittany Brode, the daughter of Brad and Cheryl Brode. The Brodes joined our church when Brittany was a youth. When she was still younger she was in the Ravenna United Methodist Church. She was confirmed in this church and has been very active; she is still a member of our church, and though she now lives and works in the Columbus area, she continues to regularly connect with our worship digitally. Her testimony comes in video form, and we share it with you now.

[in the video, Brittany shares her story of recognizing her own sexual orientation, searching for an understanding of God's will for her, and finding acceptance in God's embracing love and in the welcoming attitude of the Kent church]

In the sermon series on human sexuality, I referred to the message in the book of Genesis that God created each one of us and that what God creates is good. Brittany affirms that same message in her testimony; but there is a whole additional level of meaning when you hear what that message has meant in the personal life of someone we know. This is the power of personal testimony, where we see how what we believe makes a difference in people's lives.

If God is prompting you to tell a story about how God has been at work in your life, please speak with me, and we can get you in the schedule in the coming months. We can do the testimony in video format, or you can do it live, as long as you commit to being at all three worship services! Whether or not you do one of these Sunday morning testimonies, what the New Testament encourages each of us to think about is how we can be witnesses for Christ and for God's truth in the world.

In the book of Acts, in the passage we heard this morning, there is an account of the disciples meeting the Risen Christ after the Resurrection. They ask him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6) They were thinking that maybe now Jesus would fulfill the expectation of the Palm Sunday crowd and would establish that earthly kingdom in which the believers finally could sit back and vaunt themselves over their enemies. Jesus put that idea firmly to rest when he said to them, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8). Jesus' plan for his followers was not that they would sit back in a pious and blessed crowd but that they would go forth as witnesses to personally testify to the grace

and truth of Christ—in Jerusalem (locally), in Judea (regionally), in Samarian (further out), and to the ends of the earth.

On Palm Sunday, we often like to imagine ourselves standing along the roadside cheering for Jesus. We join in singing our Hosannas. There is value in that, when we are authentically praising Jesus as Lord and Savior. But it is also valuable to remember that the real Christian life involves a lot more than standing by the roadside cheering for Jesus. Most of the people's cheers on Palm Sunday were not followed by anything good. What we are called to do is to move far beyond the roadside to join with the disciples in bringing the good news and love of Christ to the world. We do that when in our own life we bear witness to how God continues to be at work in us through the grace and power of Jesus Christ.