

Palm Sunday (A) 2023
Encounters with Jesus: The Holy Week Crowd by Jim McCrea

A person leading a spiritual retreat once asked the people gathered there to think of someone who represented Christ in their lives. I assume that the leader and presumably most of the retreat participants were expecting to hear a bunch of feel-good stories when it came time for people to share their answers. But that illusion was shattered when one woman stood up and said, "I had to think hard about that one. I kept asking myself, 'Who is it who told me the truth about myself so clearly that I wanted to kill him for it?'" The contrast between the happy expectations of the retreat members and the hard truth shared by that one woman offers us a glimpse into the power and reality of Palm Sunday.

Palm Sunday begins Holy Week with a tremendous celebration, a parade in honor of what appears to be the immediate fulfillment of centuries of prophecies. It was a moment when the hopes of the people of Jerusalem were raised sky-high.

But it is impossible to fully understand Holy Week — and particularly the reactions of the crowd in Holy Week — unless you understand its roots in the Old Testament story of the Passover. Passover is the ancient ritual that celebrates God's actions in freeing the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. Yes, it's a recognition of how God acted on behalf of the Hebrew people in the past. But it's never told that way. Passover is a story about freedom, but it's never presented as the story of distant, legendary events that happened to ancient Jewish ancestors. It is always considered to be the personal story of every succeeding generation, including our own.

It's as if all Jews of all time were enslaved by the most powerful nation on earth. And all Jews of all time were forced to endure harsh labor and unbelievable cruelty. And all Jews of all time were feeling lost and abandoned, oppressed and hopeless and totally forgotten by God. But then God sent them Moses. Through him, God led them out of Egypt and to the edge of the Promised Land.

That's why Passover is a living story generation after generation. Passover is the constantly-renewing story of hope in the face of desolation. Passover is the story of God's faithfulness even when we have lost faith. Passover is a reminder that God always sees our tears and will continue to work on our behalf now and far into the future.

But more particularly, in terms of our gospel lesson today, for the people of Jesus' day, Passover represented a sign of their political thirst for freedom as well as being a religious cry from the heart. Passover is so deeply interwoven into the life and history of the nation of Israel that it was impossible to imagine the Hebrews as a people without the Passover.

The people of Jerusalem would have known the amazing stories of how he given legs to the lame and sight to the blind. However, the people of Jerusalem would have told those stories to one another with a glance over both shoulders, followed by whispered questions as to whether he might be the Messiah they had been searching for so long. It was clear that no one could do the things he was said to do unless that power came from God. But were the stories true?

Jesus lived out in the provinces — out in the Galilee region, a land where troublemakers would go to flee the steady eye of Rome that constantly roams over Jerusalem. Galilee was also known as the place from which troublemakers come to bring their unrest to other places.

Knowing that, the people in Jerusalem wondered if they could trust those tales of miracles in distant places. Could those stories be mere fables designed to lure the credulous into belief in yet another manufactured Messiah? There was no way to know for sure.

The people of Jerusalem believed that God had heard their groaning and sent them a conqueror — a man of faith, a man of miracles — who would deliver them from the evil that had befallen them. How could they not shout to the heavens? They had suffered for hundreds of years under the rule of foreigners in the Promised Land and they were parched for freedom in a way that those of us who have never known anything else can barely understand.

The Pharisees tried to quiet them down. "The Romans are no fools," they said. "Someone could die for this." But the time for caution was gone. The people believed that the Messiah had come. Now the battle lines would be drawn and victory would be theirs, because God was on their side. So the Pharisees tried to get Jesus to quiet the crowd down, but Jesus refused, adding, "I tell you, if these people were silent, the very stones on the road and in the walls of Jerusalem would shout out for them."

If anyone had needed further proof that this was the time of God's deliverance, that was it. The crowd believed that surely Jesus was taking their joyous mob to the garrison of the Roman Legion at the Fortress Antonia to declare their independence and begin the war for independence.

But he didn't. Instead, he led the crowd to the Temple. There he grabbed a whip and directed it against the Levites who ran the market stalls for the High Priest. He drove the merchants out, declaring the Temple to be "a den of robbers." And then, with all his violence spent in a symbolic burst of energy, he calmly sat down to teach, just like any other rabbi on any other day.

And what did that do to the crowd, Jesus' would-be army with their adrenaline pumping and spoiling for a fight? They had to wonder what had happened. And they had to feel abandoned by their commander-in-chief. How could they have misread the signs so completely?

And so the would-be army slowly melted away, badgered by confusion and frustration and disappointment. That disappointment would then set the stage for the other crowd who gathered outside Pilate's palace that Friday and demanded that Jesus be crucified.

One by one, the people of the original Palm Sunday demonstrated that they didn't really understand Jesus or what he was doing. Perhaps surprisingly, that was really the point of Palm Sunday. By making this splashy entrance into Jerusalem, Jesus was staking his claim to be the Messiah. It was a provocative action designed to force people to take a stand on who they believed Jesus to be.

Do you remember the parable Jesus told about the homeowner who went on a trip and asked his servants to keep watch until he returned? (Luke 13:32-37) Jesus says that the servant doesn't know when the master will return, so the servant needs to keep awake to avoid having the master find him asleep when the master gets home.

Isn't that the bottom line of Palm Sunday? The servants in charge of God's house — the Temple — show their true colors by being totally unprepared when God returned to his house in the form of Jesus.

What about us? Have we become so inoculated with the traditions of our faith that we no longer expect to find God's real presence among us? Is our faith merely based on dusty stories we secretly think of as fairy tales or is it something vibrant and alive?

We each to determine that for ourselves because the King of Glory is approaching. Will we recognize his presence among us or will we ignore it in favor of keeping up business as usual? Amen.

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