

“The Cries of the Crowd”

Sermon: Year B, Sunday of the Passion

Texts: Mark 11:1–11, Mark 14:1–15:47

Preached: March 25, 2018 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, IL

Grace to you, and peace, from the God who is faithful, and from Christ Jesus, who humbled himself in love.
AMEN

Early this morning I was looking at news reports of the massive March for Our Lives that took place yesterday in Washington, DC, and in hundreds of other cities. I was particularly struck by images of the crowd that were taken by satellite—a sea of people drawn together to raise their voices to demand action, crying out to elected leaders to save us from the violence and killing and fear that we live with day after day, and that seems to be rising around us. The signs the protesters carried were powerful, calling to mind shooting after shooting after shooting. Some used humor and a bit of snark. I loved, “‘Thoughts and prayers.’ Don’t overexert yourself, Senator.” And one that wrenched at my heart was a poster carried by a beautiful little girl, bearing names of the first-graders killed in the Sandy Hook massacre, and an inscription, “I am 6. So were they. #neveragain.”

There’s something about a crowd, pulled together in common purpose. It can be exhilarating, empowering. A crowd can bring about change. That’s the kind of crowd we experience in the first gospel reading we heard today. It’s kind of a flash mob. Jesus stages an entrance into the Holy City, riding on a colt, an image linked historically and biblically to the kings of Israel. His disciples begin casting their cloaks down for him to sit upon, begin strewing garments before him to ride over, the sign of swearing loyalty to a new ruler, and soon the crowd begins to form and swell, and people begin cutting branches and waving them and lining his path. And their chant soon begins to form, and they cry out, “Hosanna!” We have transformed that word into a word of praise, but in Hebrew and Aramaic it actually means, “Come and save us! Help us!”

You see, these folks were also marching for their lives, crying out against crushing poverty and oppressive government imposed by the occupying Roman Empire, crying out against the injustice and violence that are a part of their daily reality. People have gathered from all over in Jerusalem for Passover, crammed together in the city, sharing complaints and building unrest. Passover is a dangerous time in the view of the Romans, because the Passover narrative of liberation from oppression and bondage is strong. And so a glimmer of hope begins to spark, and to catch fire, as people who are longing for release and healing and peace dare to believe that there is someone who can save them from all that harms them. And to the cries of “Hosanna, save us!” are added “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!”, the connection to the promised restoration of a reign of peace and security. Could this Jesus be the one anointed by God?

But crowds can be fickle, and within a day, the empowered mob chanting “Hosanna, save us!” becomes the disillusioned mob calling out “Crucify him!” Behind the scenes, powerful interests have been at work: a Roman administration intent on maintaining political power and stamping out any signs of dissent that might threaten that...a religious power structure more concerned with not rocking the boat and with keeping the power and wealth and prestige that is theirs by dint of their office than they are with establishing justice for the widow and the orphan and the alien dwelling in their land, as commanded by Torah and the words of the prophets, motivated by fear of “What will happen if we take the part of those demanding change?”. And so the power of the crowd demanding justice must be cut off, distracted, defused, lest the cries for help upset the way things are.

And on this Passion Sunday, as we read together the narrative of those events, both as we call out “Hosanna!” and as we shout “Crucify him!”, we discover anew that we are in both crowds. We hear the cries of the sick, and the poor, and the oppressed, we come with our own burdens of oppression, and we cry together, “Hosanna! Save us! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord!” But we also revert to our fears of rocking the boat, we cling to our power and prestige and belongings, and all too soon we are the ones crying “Crucify him!” because we don’t really want to change the way things are, afraid to let go because we don’t know what lies on the other side, because we’re afraid that we might have to give up something that is ours.

And there at the center, our branches strewn at his feet, is Jesus, the humble servant, the one who empties himself in love, the one who gives up everything—the power and privilege that are his, his very life—to show us that the power of God is found in unshakeable, unrelenting, self-giving love, in God’s faithfulness to God’s covenant no matter what the cost. And at the cross, we hear once again Jesus’ truth that unless a seed falls into the earth and dies, it can bear no fruit. This is the Good News of this week: It is in letting go, in dying to those things we may think are the most precious, in yielding in active love for the neighbor, that the power of God is revealed. And in that dying and rising, in that love that chooses to act rather than to simply offer “thoughts and prayers,” that is where we will find life for ourselves and our neighbors. Thanks be to God. AMEN