

Part of the Crowd

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John 12:9-19

When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!”

Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written: “Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt!”

His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. So the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to

testify. It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. The Pharisees then said to one another, “You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!”

Years ago, Lori and I went with some friends to see a play in Morehead, Kentucky. We had been told it would be a different type of performance, taking place in an old courthouse, but as soon as we entered the building that night realized it would be unique in other ways as well.

Two actors in full costume walked up and asked if we were Republicans or Democrats. In the play, they were candidates for sheriff, and after seeking our vote, they moved on. We then entered a long hallway filled with people that included other playgoers and the rest of the cast, all in character. Soon, the two men running for office made brief speeches to the group. There were cheers and jeers from the crowd before we moved upstairs to the old courtroom.

It was there that the judge explained the rules for the evening. We learned that we would not be staying in that room but were to pick out one or more of the actors and follow wherever they went. If they left the courtroom, we were to do the same. If they went downstairs, we were to go, listen to what they had to say, and then accompany them as they continued on their way. We were told that we were free at any time to start following a different character.

With that word, we set out, deciding to go with one of the law enforcement candidates to a back room where his team mapped out their next move. We heard them argue about strategy and learned what had happened in the prior weeks. We began to understand the character better as he expressed jealousy and anger, even a broken heart. After a heated debate, two actors left the room. Lori and I quickly followed them down the stairs, listening in as the drama unfolded.

For nearly two hours, we kept moving from one room to another. Occasionally, the entire cast and audience would reassemble in the courtroom, where we would ask our friends what had happened in the rooms they had visited. Bit by bit, we pieced together the full story so that when the play ended, we had learned enough to understand why the events

had occurred as they did. It was a fun evening, and what made it especially enjoyable was being part of the drama.

This morning, we're going to model that approach with our New Testament reading. I'm not going to ask you to move around the church campus and promise we will not be here for two hours, but I would invite you to find yourself in that first-century drama. There are many roles described by a gospel playwright named John — the disciples, Jesus, and the Pharisees — but those parts are set. Instead, your task is to discover which one of the crowds John names best describes you at the start of this Holy Week or which one you intend to follow in the days ahead.

All four gospels recall Jesus' dramatic entry into Jerusalem astride an animal, but only John tells us it occurred on a Sunday and that the people waved palm branches. In addition, it is only in the fourth gospel that those events are placed in the context of the raising of Lazarus. We have followed that narrative throughout this season of Lent—from the day Jesus got word that his friend was sick, to the day he learned that Lazarus had died, to a dramatic restoration to life.

In verses we did not read, some witnesses to that miracle go to Jerusalem and tell the Pharisees about what has occurred. An emergency meeting of the Jewish council is called, and after expressing fear that even more people will follow the man from Nazareth, they plot Jesus' demise. He chooses to stay in Bethany, just outside of the city, and has dinner with his friends.

Our reading picks up the narrative at that point, and over its verses, John names four crowds.

First is the Saturday gathering in Bethany: "When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there," John says, "they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus whom he had raised from the dead." The

way the gospel writer describes that assembly sounds like they were a group who had gathered primarily to confirm that Lazarus had, in fact, been raised. Word had spread about that amazing event, and they had come for a good look. If that was all that they were doing, then their activity is one to which my adult children can relate.

Beginning with the time when they were of upper elementary age, we began to take summer vacations exploring a different region of the country. Our pattern was to fly into a major city, rent a minivan, and then set out. On one trip, for instance, we flew to Seattle and after two days there drove as far east as Glacier National Park, then south to Yellowstone, headed southwest for an overnight in Boise—Rachel Pedersen’s part of the world-- and then started back where after visits in Portland and Mount Saint Helens we flew home from Seattle, having driven nearly 2000 miles. My approach was one of trying to see as much as we could in two weeks. As a result, by the time they graduated from high school, our children had been to at least 45 states.

It was on another vacation to the Southwest that we were engaged in the same pattern of brief stops before moving on. We flew into Phoenix and, after visiting family, drove to the Grand Canyon. We were not spending the night there or even hiking into the Canyon, but simply drove along the southern rim, stopping at times to soak up the scenery and take a few photos. After a couple of those moments, we got back into the van, and our daughter said, “All we do is stare and go!” While one might think that such a lament would have caused me to change our itinerary, it did not, as we still needed to tour Hoover Dam before spending the night in Las Vegas!

That dynamic was true of the first crowd John names, for once they saw that Lazarus really was alive, their curiosity was satisfied, and they went on their way back home. That’s one possibility for us on this Palm Sunday, too, yet our playwright names other groups.

“The great crowd that had come to the festival,” he continued, “heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So, they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, ‘Hosanna!’” The fact that the gospel writer introduces this group by pointing out that many of them were already in town for the Passover suggests that while some of them may have understood the significance, others participated just because it was a parade or something to do before the festival got underway. They even joined their neighbors in shouting dangerous things by calling Jesus a king, but many were there only because of their friends or because they wanted to join in the action. Perhaps that crowd best describes your motivation on this day.

John then offers an aside, citing words both from the Psalm that was our first reading and from the book of Zechariah that served as our call to worship. Together, those editorial additions helped remind the audience that Scripture had anticipated a king who would arrive on a donkey as a sign of peace. John likely added those references because he knew that in the first century, the palm branch was a symbol for revolutionaries and thus wanted his reader to understand that Jesus was a different kind of sovereign. As a good narrator, John does go on to add, “His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.”

With his audience up-to-speed, John proceeds to tell of yet another group that is active after the parade concludes. “So, the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify.” This new mix of humanity is people who had seen what had occurred in Bethany days before, when Jesus restored his friend to life. Unlike the ones who had come to the house just to see Lazarus or the voices that joined in as Jesus neared the city, this group knew of the power he possessed, and after Jesus’ dramatic and humble entrance into

Jerusalem, continued to tell others what he had done. That group thus spoke from experience and bore witness to what they had seen in him. Is that your crowd?

John then tells us about one final gathering of humans: “It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign,” John goes on, “that the crowd went to meet him.” This last group was persons who had been given some information about the miracle, perhaps knew one or two of the spokespeople bearing witness to what had occurred, and now wanted to go meet Jesus themselves. We might call them seekers, but they are different from the first crowd, as they are not simply there to take a good look before moving on. Rather, they have heard some details about the one who restored Lazarus and seemingly want to learn more.

The tourists and the joiners, the committed and the curious; all of them were part of the crowd on that first Palm Sunday and probably are here this morning, too. Was there overlap between the four groups as people moved between one crowd and another? It’s certainly possible, as John doesn’t name any of the individuals found in those groups or pass judgment on the motivations of any of them. Instead, he simply describes them all and then points to the conclusion, for after naming the last crowd, our playwright notes, “The Pharisees then said to one another, ‘You see, you can do nothing. Look, the whole world has gone after him.’”

Thus, over the span of 11 verses, John reminds us of the potential and peril in any crowd, inviting us on this day to identify which one most resonates with us. At the same time, his report of such diversity offers a clear reminder that many times, crowds miss the point.

On a day in 1807 when Lancaster, Pennsylvania native Robert Fulton gave his first public showing of the steamboat, it is recorded that skeptics crowded along the banks of the Hudson River. The inventor had promised that this new kind of transportation would forever change travel from New

York City to Albany, yet just before the steamboat began to move, voices from the riverbank shouted, "It'll never start. It'll never start." History, of course, tells us a different story, as with a lot of clanking and groaning, the boat started up the river. The skeptics were quiet--for one minute--until the same group began to shout, "It'll never stop. It'll never stop."
(Commencement speech by Scott Jacobson, told in the *Speaker's Idea File @ 1989*)

Sometimes crowds grasp the truth, but many times they do not. Thus, at the start of this Holy Week, a Biblical playwright invites us to consider which gathering reflects our insight and intention. And instead of staying with any crowd that we cast our lot with the one who entered Jerusalem long ago and follow him into the week ahead wherever he leads.