

Two Crowds  
Luke 19:28-40 & Luke 23:1-25  
Palm/Passion Sunday  
April 10, 2022  
First Presbyterian, Luling

I'm not a fan of crowds. And since the pandemic, even less so. As much I like to think I would have been cheering "Hosanna" in Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday, it is actually far more likely that I would have been at home, listening to the cheers from a distance.

This Palm Sunday, let's think about where *we* might have been in these stories, part of the crowd. In the opening reading, the crowd is joyful and excited. It's a joyful procession but not a very impressive one, frankly. Luke just calls it "the people" rather than a crowd. Not as impressive as the entrance of a king or ruler, who would have had chariots and soldiers. But the people who are gathered are just as enthusiastic as if there had been lots of ceremony and displays of power.

The people spread their cloaks on the ground, making Jesus's entrance as impressive as they could with what they had available. Then they all begin to praise God loudly for all the deeds of power they had witnessed. As the Gospels point out over and over, Jesus's healings and exorcisms and miracles point to God's glory. People praise God after Jesus works and walks among them.

Within that crowd were some unhappy people, though. The Pharisees were there, and they thought it was not acceptable for people to praise *God* for what *Jesus* had done. That was too close to saying Jesus *was* God.

This Palm Sunday crowd is exactly what the Roman authorities were worried about, so they were also troubled. It was Passover, and Jerusalem was filled up with pilgrims. Passover was far from simply a religious observance. It was a remembrance of God delivering the Israelites out of Egypt, a powerful country that oppressed them. The Egyptians didn't come out so well in that story and were eventually destroyed. For Rome, a powerful country that also oppressed the Israelites, you can see why they might be nervous about the remembrance of such a story. If God is powerful enough to destroy the Egyptian empire, then it seems clear that these once-again oppressed people gathering together to remember that Passover story might be on the edge of turning against Rome.

And so to have a crowd gathered and stirred up....well, this was not a good thing, to the Roman authorities. Nor to the Temple authorities, who wanted to stay on the Romans' good side. More crowds gathering just led to more instability.

So that's where things stood on that Sunday. And as we know, as the week goes on, the Romans get disturbed enough to arrest Jesus. The elders of the Israelites bring Jesus to Pilate and list out their accusations against him. Pilate can't find a reason that Jesus is guilty of anything, but then sends Jesus to Herod. Herod sends him right back to Pilate.

Then the second crowd enters the picture. Pilate actually calls them in—the chief priests, the leaders, *and* the people. Pilate announces his verdict, which is that Jesus is guilty of none of the charges against him and Pilate will release him. That stirs up the crowd, and they call out

for Jesus to be crucified and for Barabbas to be released instead. Barabbas was a murderer. Pilate tries again, but this time the crowd has gained a power of its own and calls, over and over again, for Jesus to be crucified. Pilate tries for a third time to reason with the crowd, but it is a lost cause. It is long past the opportunity for reason or logic. The crowd is reacting on pure emotion, swayed by the sensational accusations they have heard. The crowd getting out of control is the last thing that Pilate wants or needs to happen, as such a riot could grow and spread rapidly, so he gives them what they say they want.

This crowd is the flip side of the previous one, when rumblings of discontent get stirred up and grow exponentially. I wonder if the same people who were there on Palm Sunday, rejoicing and praising God along with their community as the healer and teacher Jesus rode into town, then were there on Friday to shout “crucify him,” swept along by the ugliness of the crowd.

I want to think that I would have gone along with the Sunday crowd but not the Friday crowd. I want to think that I would have been the one to speak up on Friday. But if I could get caught up in one, I could have so easily gotten caught up in the other.

There's some of both crowds in each of us. There's the part of us that sees Jesus as he really is, that praises God for who Jesus is and what he has done for us. And then there's the part of us that doesn't stand up for Jesus when the going gets tough, who gives in to keep a shaky peace.

Let's choose wisely and carefully, joining in on the side of Jesus.