

## **From "Hosanna!" to "Crucify Him!"**

**April 17, 2011 Lent 6A**

### **Matthew 21:1-11**

21:1 When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples,

21:2 saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me.

21:3 If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately."

21:4 This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

21:5 "Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

21:6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them;

21:7 they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them.

21:8 A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road

21:9 The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

21:10 When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?"

21:11 The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

### **Matthew 27:11-26**

27:11 Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You say so."

27:12 But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer.

27:13 Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?"

27:14 But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

27:15 Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted.

27:16 At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas.

27:17 So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?"

27:18 For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over.

27:19 While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him."

27:20 Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed.

27:21 The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas."

27:22 Pilate said to them, "Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" All of them said, "Let him be crucified!"

27:23 Then he asked, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!"

27:24 So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves."

27:25 Then the people as a whole answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!"

27:26 So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

## **Proclamation of the Word**

Crowds are loud....here today we see the bustling of our own planned, controlled chaos of a palm procession and reenactment. Crowds add to the excitement. Today's kick-off parade of the Passover festival in Jerusalem in today's Scripture is much akin to a First Friday parade in Clemson, SC. Cheers and shouts, celebration and excitement are in the air. Faces and painted and new t-shirts printed. There is anticipation, a new year, a fresh start, and high hopes. It must have felt like a first Friday in Clemson at that ancient Palm parade.

Jesus enters Jerusalem on the holy Passover week for God's people. And it all begins with a grand Procession, a parade. God's people celebrate the Passover every year. The Passover is when they remember the 10<sup>th</sup> plague in Egypt where the Hebrew children were enslaved. The Angel of death killed every first-born male in every household except for the Hebrew children. The Hebrews sacrificed a lamb. The blood of the lamb was painted on the lintel of the doorframe. The Angel passed over the houses where the blood of the lamb was. On that night, the children of God would leave their homes and cross the Red Sea to freedom. Each year the Jews would celebrate their freedom and remember how God had saved their ancestors bringing them up out of the land of Egypt in the Passover festival.

Smell the lamb roasting and the sounds of music in the streets as people come from north, south, east and west to celebrate the Passover Seder meal. This week in Jerusalem is the setting for the grand entrance of Jesus and the horror of the holy week. The contrast is apparent. And the crowds are loud. They are shouting "Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" Hosanna- save us. And Jesus, which means "God Saves", is the one riding on a colt and her foal as the crowds pull branches off the palm trees.

Later that week, there will be another crowd who will be shouting again. This time, they will taunt Jesus after being riled up by the Scribes and elders. They will yell "Crucify him!" In a matter of days, the crowd turns. Somehow their knowledge of Jesus identity earlier in the week, has evaporated. In both these passages read, the crowds are loud. The leaders, Scribes and elders, are seen whispering and manipulating the crowds. Pilate speaks, questions, judges and sentences Jesus. The contrast of the first Friday parade to the trial and crucifixion is palpable. Their voices are strong and clear.

But consider Jesus. Jesus is strangely quiet in this story of the last week of his life. Some say we call this week Christ's Passion not because of the bloodiness, but because Jesus is indeed a passive participant in the week's events. Consider Jesus. He only answers when questioned by Pilate. Jesus is almost silent. Is the crowd drowning out God's voice? Where is the voice of God which called life into being in Creation and separated the waters of the Red Sea so the Hebrew people could be set free from slavery? Where is the voice of God? Why doesn't Jesus speak up? And why doesn't God do something?

Perhaps Jesus himself is setting an example to Christians in Matthew's time who are persecuted, as Jesus had said earlier in the Gospel when he sent out his disciples on their mission. Jesus said, "You will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as testimony to them and the Gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say" (10:18-19). Now Jesus himself is dragged before a governor and handed over to him by the Jewish leaders. And he barely speaks. Even the governor, Pilate, is amazed when Jesus does not speak up or try to defend himself.

Interestingly, the one instance of God speaking is through Pilate's wife. A dream, believed to be God's way of communicating, reveals that something is terribly wrong. She goes to her husband and tells that her dream reveals much suffering because of this man, Jesus' innocence. She is dismissed, blown off, silenced. Just as Joseph's dreams had warned him to escape to Egypt with the Baby Jesus to save him from King Herod, a

dream is warning Pilate of what is to take place. But no one is listening. No one is listening for God's voice. They are all caught up in the drama and trying to maintain the peace. Keeping the peace was valued higher than listening for God's voice.

For centuries the Jews have been called Christ-killers. Some have hid out on Holy Week in ages past because of a real danger. Jews have been villified for concocting the execution of Jesus because the Chief Priests and Elders sway the crowd to release Barabbas instead of Jesus. Jews have been demonized for yelling "Crucify Him!" when given the choice. Pogroms, crimes, and the holocaust were committed in large part based on this prejudice. But today we must acknowledge that we all could have easily been a part of the crowd. Of all people, the Jews who had pinned their hopes on a Messiah, could not recognize him. They had been watching, waiting, hoping and praying. The God-fearing Jews of all people were even blind to God's salvific work in Jesus of Nazareth. And how can we judge? We have not always listened for the still small voice of God speaking in a whisper in contrast to the loud, shouting crowds. Indeed his blood is on all our hands. And even though Pilate symbolically washes his hands and declares himself to be innocent, only Pilate holds the cards and orders the execution on behalf of the State. Only Jesus is innocent as Pilate's wife declares in her dream. Suffice it to say, Jesus' blood is on everyone's hands. There is guilt to go around.

Crowds have lots of power. I witnessed that recently at the April meeting of the Board of Trustees for the School District of Pickens County. When 400 showed up to show concern over deep cuts in much needed programs for education, the size of the crowd helped the Board determine to move the meeting to a week later in a larger venue. In that week, parents and citizens had met with trustees, the superintendent of Schools, and the local State legislators. The following week 1000 people attended that Board meeting, spoke up, and stood watch for 4 hours. The proposed program cuts had shifted and improved some. Crowds do have influence and power to influence leaders just as leaders have the power to control and influence the crowds. All parties involved have a role to play. And a lot can happen in a week.

Just like Pilate, we try to wash our hands. We forget that we are part of the crowd. We forget that our complicity with injustice can destroy others. We can turn a deaf ear, a blind eye. We want to blame things on "that's just how the world works" or "I cannot help that I am privileged by virtue of my race, class, gender." We wash our hands and say, "I didn't do it, not my fault." When we throw up our hands and say it's the system or The Man...we have joined Pilate in washing our hands. And Pilate's hand washing is ineffective, for the guilt is still his. The crowd made a choice and the Scribes and the elders manipulated justice because they could. There is guilt all around. That is how sin works. All parties are caught in it. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God according to Paul in the letter to the Romans.

It only took a week for the world to turn on Jesus just like it took a week to create all things good in Creation. A lot can happen in a week. It took God 7 days to create the world, to order the waters of chaos into their places and to form land into place to hold back the waters. Life was created and flourished in 7 days. And in the 7 days of Jesus' last week chaos returns. All that good intention of Creation is undone in seven days. Goodness, love, and hope is destroyed in the person of Jesus who willingly allowed it. Disorder, sin, brokenness, chaos of the world is unleashed and placed upon the lamb of God, Jesus, who takes away the sin of the world. All the weight of that darkness and grief was placed on his shoulders. He was the one who shows in his life and his death that God intends something better- healing of broken hearts and bodies. He served out of love not loved in a quest for power. His life was built on sacrificial, generous love not hate or greed. And now this? God indeed works in strange ways.

As one writer asks, "So where is God when a righteous Son is gasping for air on a Roman cross? Why is God silent? Why does he not send ten thousand angels and show the world a thing or two? God remains silent until the fury of human defiance and sin carries out to the fullest extent its gruesome imaginations. When the life of the Son of God is snuffed out, it is then that God speaks. God speaks loud and clear. He speaks not in vengeance, counter-attack and destruction. God does not kill Pilate, the Roman soldiers, the high priests and the passers-by. Instead, he splits a curtain and makes himself open and available. He splits rocks, gives the world a shake, opens tombs and lets his saints out of their graves. It is at that point that the Roman soldiers realize how pitiful and puny they are and all their bravado melts and they gasp, "Truly this man was God's Son!"<sup>1</sup>

Indeed in the suffering and silence of Jesus, we find a God who will not coerce us, scare us, or manipulate us into faith and trust. Just as God spoke in a dream to Pilate's wife as the powers that be rage around Jesus, God spoke before Jesus was born. And Joseph's dream comes true. When the angel of the Lord announced Jesus' birth the angel proclaims, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1:20-21)

Perhaps in the events of holy week, God is done with talk for true love shows itself in action.

And this week God's actions speak louder than words.

Laura Smith Conrad  
Fort Hill Presbyterian Church

<sup>1</sup>Jirair Tashjian, The Christian Resource Institute, Lectionary Lent6A  
<http://www.cresourcei.org/lectionary/YearA/Alent6nt.html>