
Beyond the Crowds

Matthew 21:1-11

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 5, 2020 by the Rev. Kathryn Lester-Bacon

Palm Sunday is a time of festal gathering—palm branches, bright music, and exuberance, spilling out of aisles and into the streets. In most years, it is a large day of celebration for churches all around the world, a celebration built on the scriptural witness of crowds gathering to cheer on Christ's entrance into Jerusalem.

The grand celebration of this scripture sets it apart as a liturgical tradition. After all, most of our liturgical stories come from small, intimate moments in the bible. The birth of Jesus happens between a handful of villagers on a hillside. The resurrection of Jesus is discovered when three women have an earth-shaking encounter in an empty tomb.

Palm Sunday and Pentecost are different. Both of these liturgical days have always been about the whole family of Jesus followers coming together with shouts and celebration.

Here in the text we are told that a “very large crowd” gathers together. People spread cloaks on the ground. They shout. They wave branches. They definitely do not keep at least six feet from each other.

No matter how often we have heard this story before, this text probably sounds different to our socially distanced ears today. We might feel a little uneasy about this visual of teeming crowds in the busy streets. This story might sound a little more dangerous than usual.

Our unease is not inaccurate. As one scholar writes, such a gathering in Jerusalem at such a time would have been “full of danger and denseness.”¹

In the first century CE, Jerusalem was central to cultural, political, and religious life in the region. During Passover the city streets would have swelled with pilgrims, vendors, and soldiers. Authorities would have been on high alert. The occupying Roman army would have been ready to swiftly deal with any disturbance. Temple power players would have been worried that any bit of trouble might topple a tentative status quo.

When Jesus enters the city in this story, he is inviting more than a little bit of trouble. He chooses to ride a donkey and colt, a direct reenactment of Zechariah's prophecy about the arrival of a king. He enters during Passover, when the city is at its busiest, when soldiers are at their greatest strengths. People shout “Hosanna! Save us!” which is a cry of hope interlaced with despair.

When Jesus rides into this city in this way, at this time, accompanied by these cheers, he is striking a match right next to an emotional, religious, and political powder keg.

This large crowd that we celebrate on Palm Sunday is not a cheerful party. This gathering is not the beginning of Christ's public celebrations. It is the end of them.

Palm Sunday is the last time large crowds will show up expecting Jesus, this healer from Galilee, to entertain them with some good teachings. After today, things are going to start to change. This Jesus will refuse to keep up the spectacle. He will cease to keep us entertained. His words and acts

¹ Loader, William. “First Thoughts on Year A Gospel Passages from the Lectionary: Palm Sunday.” <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MtPalmSunday.htm>

will not distract us from the abiding oppressions of the world, but rather plunge us deeper into them. We who shout “Hosanna!” will soon find our calls curdling into a different cry, a cry for conviction and crucifixion. Jesus is not going to stay as the leader of our rally for very long.

No matter how much we want to wave palms and cheer with abandon, no matter how much we want to put aside all the pains of the world just for today, no matter how much we want to lose ourselves in a celebration, Jesus will not let us. Jesus will not let us get too comfortable in that crowd. Jesus keeps leading us onward.

This week is the start of Holy Week. This week, Jesus leads us beyond the crowds. He takes us past the cheers. This week Jesus will take us to places we would rather not see—then and now.

We who are singing “Hosanna!” will soon be led into some dark corners and hellish hallways, forced to face every bloody gash in the fabric of our faith and world.

This year, we are being more prepared than usual to see beyond the cheers and spectacle. With the Covid19 crisis gripping our communities, we are already being forced to confront a reality that we cannot control or command. Some of us are more vulnerable and more exposed than others. Some of us have very few resources to make it through this time.

We must say out loud that this virus has not been sent to teach us anything. It is not here for our epiphanies. It is not here for a sermon illustration. This virus is a naturally occurring event that is wreaking havoc on our systems and pouring grief into our lives.

Yet, even in this moment, perhaps we are being shown some truths about our selves and our world, which we usually are too busy to notice. In this season of life and liturgy, perhaps we are being prepared to glimpse some places and people that we usually are able to avoid.

Right now, no matter who we are, no matter where we are from, no matter how much we own, all of us are being forced to face our finitude, our failings, our interconnected vulnerability. We are being forced to discover who is truly essential to the underpinning of our society and working world. We are being forced to experience the exposed nerves of our communities, confront the crumbling of our social safety nets. We are being forced to stare at some situations that we can usually avoid in the noise and cheers and mess of the crowd.

Jesus Christ is going to lead us onward. Perhaps this year, more than many others, we will not be able to shut our eyes. Perhaps we will be more prepared to see where Jesus is leading.

There are many dark and wounded spaces in our world, places where we conveniently hide away the people and pains that we would rather avoid.

In Holy Week, we discover that God sees these hidden spaces, clearly and fully.

In Holy Week, we discover that God is living and dying in these places, with these people.

This week Jesus Christ is leading us onward. He will show us what despair sounds like in the Garden of Gethsemane, what injustice looks like in a courtyard before Pilate. Jesus is going to show us what isolation feels like in a jail cell, when you wait for your sentencing, after all your friends have fled.

Jesus is going to show us how it is to walk through moments when nobody on earth can understand the weight in your heart or the grief in your gut. This week, Jesus is going to take us

up into the splinters of a criminal's cross, and then down down down into the entombed darkness of a stone-bound death.

Jesus our Christ is going to take us to the most painful limits of life and when we open our eyes, and realize where we are, we will discover that Christ has been with us every step of the way.

I wonder where Jesus is leading you this week. I wonder what hidden spaces of your heart, your faith, your life you are being shown.

I wonder what often-avoided people and places of our world we are being forced to notice at last. I wonder where Jesus is leading us this week.

Recently I read the story of the family of Hoang Dinh Nguyen in the Seattle Times. Nguyen was a seventy-two-year-old man stricken by Covid19. In his seven decades of life, he survived an escape from North Vietnam, a refugee camp in Indonesia, immigration to the United States, and after that two strokes and cancer. He married and raised a family of 7 sons and daughters.

A few weeks ago his family was stunned to find out that he was going downhill quickly with a new illness. Here is what journalist Nina Shapiro wrote for the Times about Nguyen's final hours:

The cars streamed into the hospital parking lot close to midnight as the family of Hoang Dinh Nguyen rushed to say goodbye...

There in the parking lot, Father Thanh Dao led the family in prayer. Some stood in a circle, spreading out to maintain social distancing. Others, like Viet, self-isolating because his husband was showing possible coronavirus symptoms, popped their heads out of sunroofs.

And then, the priest, Nguyen's wife, Ty Nguyen, and their daughter, Cuc Crystal Nguyen, went inside...

Amid the challenges and heartbreak came ingenuity and compassion, the latter particularly shown by a nurse Crystal describes as "fearless."

Ty thought her husband had passed away when she, Crystal and Father Dao saw Nguyen through the glass in the ICU. His skin was discolored, Crystal recalled. But he was still breathing on the ventilator.

Nurse Judy, as Crystal came to know her, was with him, wearing a mask below her glasses, protective head covering, gloves, and a yellow gown covering her from neck to shins to wrists...

Nurse Judy took on an extraordinary role.

Neither Dao nor another priest called by the hospital could get into the room to deliver last rites. So Nurse Judy dipped a Q-tip into oil brought by one of the priests and made a cross on Nguyen's forehead and hand. The priests called out instructions and recited prayers through a walkie-talkie.

Nurse Judy gestured to Ty to press her hand against the window. The nurse held up her own hand to meet it on the other side of the glass and put her other hand on one of Nguyen's feet — connecting husband and wife...

A respiratory therapist came in to help disconnect the ventilator. Crystal used the walkie-

talkie to talk to her dad. “Daddy, wake up,” she said. His eyes remained closed but she saw his chest move...

Crystal connected to those in the parking lot by video group chat with her phone and held it so they could see Nguyen. “We love you daddy,” they called out as Crystal broadcast their voices through the walkie-talkie...

When death came, Crystal said, her dad knew everyone was there, “that the coronavirus that is isolating everyone was not going to stop my mom or me or my siblings from seeing him at the very end.”²

We cannot distract ourselves right now. We cannot cheer away our fear. We cannot work our way out of our vulnerability. We are being confronted by our creatureliness, our finitude and frailty, our interconnected need for each other.

We are realizing that, when we want to stay cocooned in comfort, Jesus our Christ is trying to lead us onward. Onward to a hospital room where we see a family using all their resources to share all their love with their father. Onward to a hospital bedside where an overworked nurse still finds the strength to stretch out her arms and use her whole body to reveal that, even in isolation, we are more bound together than we know.

Jesus is leading us onward. Onward to a cross where Jesus himself will bear in his body the revelation that nothing in heaven or earth or under the earth can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Jesus is leading us onward. Onward to a place where death is real, death is painful, but death does not have final word.

In this season, we are being shown places and people that we would rather avoid. Perhaps this will be the moment when we finally realize that, in all these hidden places, with all these overlooked people, God has been dwelling. God has been there, dying and living for a long long long long time.

Jesus our Christ is leading us onward. He has something to show us. We will never be the same.

Amen.

² Shapiro, Nina. “Grief, compassion and ingenuity as the coronavirus brings endless complications to one family’s goodbye.” *Seattle Times*. 30 March 2020. <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/heartbreak-ingenuity-and-compassion-as-the-coronavirus-brought-endless-complications-to-one-familys-ordeal/>