



Roanoke, Virginia

March 24, 2024

## ***“Following: The Crowds”***

*Part VI of the Lenten Sermon Series, “Following”*

Matthew 21:6-15, Matthew 27:15-23

**Rev. Elizabeth N.H. Link**

Our scripture readings this morning take place during Holy Week. Our first reading from Matthew 21 marks the start. Jesus and his disciples have traveled to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. Staying outside the city, Jesus directs two of his disciples to collect a donkey and its colt for his journey in. It is an old prophecy he knows he is to fulfill.

Matthew 21:6-15. <sup>6</sup>The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; <sup>7</sup>they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. <sup>8</sup>A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. <sup>9</sup>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!’

<sup>10</sup>When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’ <sup>11</sup>The crowds were saying, ‘This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.’

<sup>12</sup> Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves. <sup>13</sup>He said to them, ‘It is written, “My house shall be called a house of prayer”; but you are making it a den of robbers.’



<sup>14</sup> The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. <sup>15</sup> But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David’, they became angry.

Our second reading skips ahead to Matthew 27—a different kind of crowd is gathered and has turned their ire on Jesus just five days after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, on the day we now know as Good Friday. Judas has betrayed him, and the chief priests and temple guards have turned Jesus over to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor.

Matthew 27:15-23. <sup>15</sup> Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. <sup>16</sup> At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. <sup>17</sup> 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?’ <sup>18</sup> For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. <sup>19</sup> While he was sitting on the judgement 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.’ <sup>20</sup> Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. <sup>21</sup> The governor again said to them, ‘Which of the two do you want me to release for you?’ And they said, ‘Barabbas.’ <sup>22</sup> Pilate said to them, ‘Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?’ All of them said, ‘Let him be crucified!’ <sup>23</sup> Then he asked, ‘Why, what evil has he done?’ But they shouted all the more, ‘Let him be crucified!’

Crowds followed Jesus wherever he went. Some came because they were curious. They’d heard that Jesus could do miraculous things. Some came because they wanted healing. They’d heard that he could make the blind see and the lame walk. Some came because they wanted to be free. They’d heard he could cast out demons and he spoke of forgiveness. Some came because they were hungry for a new kind of teaching. They’d heard him speak of an upside-down kingdom where the poor are rich in spirit and the meek and lowly are lifted up.

Matthew tells us in chapter 4 “...great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan” (4v25). Jews and even a growing number of Gentiles were curious. They gathered by the thousands on the side of a hill as he talked about God, and he fed them all with nothing but a few loaves and fish. One time the crowd pressed in on him so intently, he had to get into Simon’s boat and speak to them all from the water. Sometimes it was too much, and Jesus had to slip away to a quiet place to rest and pray. Sometimes it was too much, and the local leaders grew leery.

Jesus would speak to the crowds anywhere – from inside a house where he was staying, within the synagogue, out in the fields, by the water. Once, the crowds sent their children to him so he might bless them. And, to his disciples’ surprise, he welcomed the young ones with open arms.



There was something about Jesus. People were drawn to him.

For three and a half years of public ministry, Jesus had been, in a roundabout way, on the road toward Jerusalem. Finally, in his thirty-third year, the city is set before him. Mindful of the prophecy, he directed his disciples to go before him and secure a donkey. As he made his way up the hill and into the city, others along the road saw and heard him coming. Crowds began to gather. Matthew says they took the cloaks off their backs and laid them on the road. They grabbed palm branches off the ground and waved and cheered as Jesus rode by. It wasn't a fancy or grand ordeal. It was a peasant procession. It was joyful, and it was humble.

The crowd was excited to see him. They had high hopes for him. Perhaps they wanted Jesus to be the Messiah they'd prayed for. Perhaps if things could go the way they wished, Jesus would ride all the way up to the palace and be enthroned immediately, ending their oppression under Roman rule. Perhaps Jesus could ride all the way to the temple where he would take his rightful place as Lord and establish a heavenly kingdom on earth and every knee would bow and every tongue confess.

The crowd cried out, "Hosanna!" "Save us!" It was a revolutionary cry. Yet, Jesus wouldn't march through the streets inciting a revolution. Instead, he'd overthrow the money changers who were taking advantage of the poor. He'd heal the blind and lame. And as more and more children in the temple cried out "Hosanna!" the crowds grew and grew. They were drawn to him because of the kind of person he was. Because of his deeds of kindness and compassion. They were drawn to him because they'd never seen anyone else like him.

Meanwhile, at a different city gate that Sunday, crowds had gathered to see another more official parade. In stark contrast to Jesus' entrance on the east side of the city, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, entered Jerusalem from the west. Jesus' Hosanna procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate's proclaimed the power of empire. He was there to keep the masses in check this special week, where Jerusalem's Jewish population swelled many times its normal number as the faithful made their pilgrimage to observe the Passover. Pilate's parade? Perhaps the crowds were drawn to it for its show of strength and power.

2 ways ... 2 parades ... 2 different crowds.

One, kindness and compassion. The other, a show of strength and power.

If we say we want to follow Jesus, then we must be attentive to the way we choose. Jesus is lifted up because of a life and ministry of service, not because of power, pomp, and circumstance.



There are many people in this life we can be convinced to follow – for all the right reasons and all the wrong. There are good crowds, and there are not-so-good crowds.

Interestingly, in recent years, our modern understanding of crowd psychology has been shifting. In 1895, a Frenchman named Gustave La Bon wrote a book called *The Crowd*. It's been described as the most influential psychology text of all time, and it has informed mass politics for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. La Bon started his analysis from the assumption that people are anonymous in crowds, that they lose their sense of self, they lose their standards, and they become incapable of thinking. They become like sheep led by others, and also they revert to a more primitive self and behave destructively. And this notion, what Le Bon called submergence, was translated into modern social psychology through the notion of deindividuation, which asked the question, “What happens when people are anonymous in groups?” What happens, how do we behave, when we think no one is watching? Many studies have been made over the years, asking this very question. Generally, these studies came to the conclusion that people behave more negatively when they think no one is watching them.

In a 2023 podcast episode, Dr. Stephen Reicher of the University of St. Andrews in Scotland explained that there were a number of problems, however, with this line of thinking. Namely, Reicher says, “What do we do when no one is watching?” is the wrong question when it comes to crowds. Most people, he argues, go into crowds with friends, with acquaintances, with people they know from organizations. The crowds, especially many of the riots which are most concerning, were those of communities, of groups. To outsiders, a riotous crowd looks like a group of anonymous people – but, Reicher argues, they are not anonymous to each other.<sup>1</sup>

Take the January 6<sup>th</sup> riot on Capitol Hill, for instance. Many of them knew each other, though they were anonymous to us.

How do we behave when no one is looking? It's a fine question to ask about our own moral character. But it's the wrong question to ask when it comes to the psychology of crowds. It seems, when it comes to crowds, you are the company you keep.

So, looking in on the crowds that Sunday morning, the men, women, and children at the eastern gate when Jesus arrived most likely knew one another, at the very least, they were acquaintances with one another. When a few began to cheer and greet Jesus, the others joined right in. This group of people likely had some sort of connection, relationship to one another, and likewise Jesus was no stranger to them – at the very least, his reputation preceded him.



Like Jesus, the crowd gathered at the eastern gate were of the peasant class. Like Jesus, they were visiting the city for Passover, and staying each night in more economical housing outside the city gates.

Late on that Thursday night and very early that Friday morning, I imagine most of the “Hosanna” crowd were still tucked away in bed while the wheels were in motion for Jesus’ arrest, crucifixion, and death. Judas chose to join the wrong crowd. Together, with the chief priests and officers of the temple guard, the grim plan was in motion.

Another crowd gathered that early Friday morning in stark contrast to the joyous one just five days before. According to Matthew, Pilate tries to convince the crowd to free Jesus of Nazareth over Barabbas, but they would not be swayed. Pilate wishes to wash his hands of the whole ordeal.

How quickly things have turned. How ready this Friday morning crowd is to dispose of Jesus.

Now, it’s likely that a few of the Palm Sunday crowd were lingering on the edges that Good Friday morning. Out there on their own, they were probably trying to actually *keep* anonymous.

We know at least Peter and the beloved disciple had been there. We read later in Matthew that there’s a small crowd of women who, very quietly and very faithfully, never left Jesus’ side and followed him all the way to the tomb. The company they kept with one another, the presence they held helped them keep the courage to stay.

Joy J. Moore, visiting professor at Luther Seminary, warns that for this reason we ought to be attentive, we ought to pay attention to *who* is around us. What company are we keeping? If we are to be a follower of Jesus, then are our brother and our sister on our right and our left seeking to show kindness and compassion like Jesus did? Or striving for power and might like Rome? Among which crowd do we find ourselves this Holy Week?

May Jesus be our model, not Caesar.

Those bracelets so many of us used to wear, What Would Jesus Do? WWJD? Pose the question we should always be asking when we find ourselves in a crowd. Look around you. What kind of folks are among the company you keep?

Speaking for myself, I am glad and grateful to have you, Second Presbyterian, among my crowd for the journey. I have seen the ways many of you care for one another, and care for our



neighbors. I have seen the ways you heal the sick – literally on the DR Medical Mission trip, and down the street at the Bradley Free Clinic. I have watched the ways you nurture and love the young ones in our preschool and teach the stories of Jesus to our daughter and her friends. I am inspired by the passion you have for God’s Word in Sunday school and midweek study. I give thanks for those among us who show up, not only with casseroles but to sit with a frightened friend in the Emergency Room for hours. Now, I know I only see some of the small ways you serve Christ’s kingdom here and now – but it’s enough for me to recognize you are the kind of company I want to keep.

But we can’t get complacent. We run in many circles and crowds. The litmus test of kindness and compassion is one we should constantly be running. It’s so easy to mistake the bluster and control in this world for true might. But remember it’s the one on the cross we serve – not the empire that put him there.

As companions in the crowd, it’s our duty now to remind one another, to encourage one another to choose the way of Jesus – not just on Sundays, not just when it feels easy, but especially when it feels hard.

This Holy Week and every week, may we hold one another up, may we remember the one we are called to follow.

---

<sup>i</sup> “Speaking of Psychology”: Crowds, obedience, and the psychology of group behavior, with Stephen Reicher, PhD Episode 241, May 2023: <https://www.apa.org/news/podcasts/speaking-of-psychology/group-behavior>

