



“CROWD NOISE”

SCRIPTURE: Luke 19:28-40

GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

Sunday, April 10, 2022, Palm/Passion Sunday

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Luke 19: 28-40

After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They said, "The Lord needs it." 19:35 Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

(Anthem)

Pretty much every Sunday, when there was a home game, for twelve football seasons, I would go from church—from the hymns, the prayers, the sermons, the beloved community, to a football stadium full of NFL fans.

The cheering crowds were intense. And it felt dissonant, too. Going from hymns of praise of the creator of the universe to people absolutely beside themselves over what happened in a football game.

(Play video—part with pictures only lasts about 20 seconds. Keep playing until indicated below)

The teams that John coached would pipe in crowd noise during practice to work on how to get plays called when stadiums get too loud to even hear yourself talk.

They got to where they weren't really affected by it. It was just crowd noise. And they figured out other ways to communicate through signals and silent cadences.

But for me, a coach's wife sitting in the stands, it was really hard for it not to impact me. Especially when things started not going well in the game. Crowd noise isn't just noise when it feels personal, about your family, about people that you love, when it's about the things that matter to you.

(stop video/noise here)

When we're honest—Palm/Passion Sunday is really all about changing our relationship to the crowd noise—to all the static that human life can generate, all the noise, all the bluster that can drown out the truth about what is really happening around us.

Or is the crowd noise actually what really is happening around us? How can we tune into the noise in a way that allows it to speak the truth to us that we most need to hear?

When it comes to Palm Sunday there is a common narrative. We are programmed to hear things and see things a certain way. The hosannas, the palms, the cloaks on the ground. Jesus riding into Jerusalem to a cheering crowd. We call it the triumphal entry.

We sing, we wave our palms—to remember, to feel the energy of that day when it seemed like things were going well for those who followed Jesus.

We even have what we think is the insider scoop—that this story is not going in a good direction. That those cheers will end in jeers—that the Hosannas become the “crucify him” from the mouths of some of the same people.

And we talk about things like Jesus' obedience and the crowds' messianic expectation. We talk about things like that the people wanted Jesus to be a kind of king that he wasn't. That he came riding in humble, not with military might. That the people still wanted him to be the kind of king who would dominate and seize the day.

The thing we don't talk about so much is the way we have missed the most important layers of this moment in time—the story and interpretations we have handed down through

the generations have done little to shake us loose from the trance of military might and supremacy.

We still cheer for the wrong things, at the wrong moments—losing sight of what’s at stake. And the story has become still a new iteration of the withering way we project onto God the things we most don’t want to let go of.

We’re supposed to be the ones who see Jesus clearly. But white washing Jesus has been a very successful strategy for making us just another crowd along the road in Jerusalem who sees who we want to see when Jesus rides by.

Perhaps more than any other story in our salvation history, this one defines our distortion even as it has retrenched it.

I don’t know what it is that we need to really be able to hear it—maybe the sound of stones crying out—an ancient trope that the gospel writer of Luke borrowed from the Prophet Habakkuk in Hebrew Scriptures:

“The very stones will cry out from the wall, and the plaster will respond from the woodwork.” (Hab 2:11)

Habakkuk was a prophet who teetered on the edge of despair because of the injustices he saw so entrenched in his society. The stones crying out speak of this primal truth—a concrete manifestation of the wrong, the harm, the trauma being acknowledged, lamented, named even when humans try to deny it.

Jesus evokes those lamenting stones—not cheering stones, but lamenting stones. Jesus chooses to ride into Jerusalem knowing all that is being projected onto him—all the desires for dominance, all the love of power, all the greed, all the fears, all the avoidance, all the hopes, all the dreams.

This moment in Jerusalem is embodied iconography of how human beings can take something that can finally make us well, and we turn it into something that justifies our pathologies.

Jesus was taking that script—and flipping it over and then over again, turning it inside out and exposing the guts of what keeps us sick.

And even so, we still miss it. We still do our simultaneous translation and make this a moment that retrenches the very captivity that this is supposed to free us from.

And this script flipping by Jesus and simultaneous translation by the likes of us—well that pretty much defines the week ahead for us. Is there a way we can see it with new eyes this year? Is there a way we can be open to the healing that Jesus is offering to us?

So crowd noise is a pretty powerful human phenomenon. It has been statistically proven to impact performance, officiating, and the outcomes of games. In fact, officials are less likely to penalize teams that the crowd is rooting for. Home field advantage is a real thing—when your fans are behind you, officials psychologically can be impacted by that. Crowds and officials are impacted by racialized bias, confirmation bias—all the things that shape the ways our brains take shortcuts in stressful, high stakes situations.

Accountability is less likely when the crowd is on your side.

The Atlanta Falcons were penalized when it was exposed that they were piping in fake crowd noise to enhance the noise in their home games. Word is that the Vikings used to do that in the Metrodome as well. Then came the NFL rule that you can't pipe fake noise into your stadium.

Of course, then COVID hit and the NFL realized that the sound of an empty stadium really didn't appeal to fans watching from home. So, they went to great lengths to create fake noise specific to each team's stadiums. And fake crowd noise became a way of life as the NFL and other professional sports leagues navigated what it was costing them to not have fans at games.

Even when everyone knew it was fake noise—it still impacted us—it still makes us feel a certain kind of way.

When we think everyone feels something, we are more likely to feel it, too. That's a part of what's hard about this day in our faith tradition. That kind of captivity we have to how we're conditioned to feel about how the world works. Power as dominance and the adulation and support of the masses—those things sell, those things get you votes, those things persuade and coerce, those things make us think everyone is ok with things the way they are.

Palm Sunday is a day when we tell ourselves it's ok to celebrate—it's ok to have this feel good moment before we have to deal with the heavy stuff. And the truth is, we've all got a

lot of heavy stuff to deal with these days. Celebrations are a good thing—and finding things to celebrate is crucial to our survival and to any chance for us to thrive.

But honestly, I don't think this is the day when we're really taking in Jesus' impact if we are celebrating. And that may not sound like anything radical for me to say. But I hope you'll listen to what I am going to say next.

The celebration of this day is misplaced not simply because we know what is coming on Good Friday—not simply because we know that Jesus will be unjustly executed by Rome in just a few days and that his friends will turn on him and that faithful people will show up to celebrate an execution—just like people would come from church, still in their church clothes and watch lynchings as they ate their lunch with their children in the town square.

The grotesquery of those optics of human cruelty is something we are confronted with time and time again—and yes, that is coming this Friday at a sanctuary or youtube feed near you!

But the celebration of this day is misplaced because of what we allow ourselves to repeat over and over again about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

We have allowed this day to tell us that God's will is being done—that God is an all powerful being who knowingly sent his own son to die on our behalf—that God decided that Jesus' sacrifice was what the world needed to pay for all the harm we do to each other. We allowed this day to be overtaken by atonement theologies, and sacrificial language, and iterations of an abusive God who uses torture and violence to solve problems and to say that things are now right with the world after someone has been murdered.

People want to say this day is Jesus' destiny, that Palm Sunday is about Jesus' obedience to God's will. But, that's really just more crowd noise that makes it hard to hear the chilling rhythm and dissonance of his entry into Jerusalem.

If we make this story about obedience, we miss that it is telling us something about human beings—about us. This is a story about what the world does to truth tellers—to those who lead with love—to those who do not stand down when they challenge the powers and principalities.

If we say this had to happen because it is God's will, it lets us off the hook.

The Bible is a book that was born out of multiple cultures—all of them trying to make meaning out of the way things are in human life. How do we overlay truth and purpose into

the relentless parade of suffering, injustice, and cruelty that human beings inflict and that human beings absorb in this world?

What if this story isn't about God's will at all—but what if this story is about what the world does to truth tellers, what the world does to liberators?

What does that change about how we encounter Jesus coming into Jerusalem again this year? Do we hear anything differently? The crowd? Our own voices? The fake noise piped in for effect?

We must bring a power analysis to this story in a new way this year—not just that Jesus isn't the kind of king the world is looking for—not just that everyone is projecting what they want Jesus to be onto Jesus.

But that the story itself was extracted from its own wrenching context and appropriated to assist in the maintaining of Empire, the maintaining of oppression—by assigning the kind of power to God, the kind of power that sentences truth tellers to a humiliating death.

Why do we accept this distortion of God's power Sunday after Sunday? Even when we know it just doesn't line up with anything our hearts tell us about what true love is?

God is not a dominating power. And God is not a murderer. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is real-time, 3D embodied iconography of what God's power does in the face of injustice and oppression—God does not take a scorched earth approach, but God uses God's own body to show us the truth about ourselves and how deeply we are loved, how clearly we are being called to a way of life that is more about healing than it is about harming.

And instead of letting that sink in and letting that change us—our culture, our horizons of possibility, our relationships, or willingness to live for and with each other—instead of that kind of transformation—we have let this story get snarled and twisted with all the ways we fantasize about a God who uses Divine power to coerce, violate, and destroy.

Jesus is pretty clear here—God doesn't work that way—and the world shows us that over and over again. Palm/Passion Sunday is iconography of the way human power so quickly lapses into violence when those with formal power do not get their way.

Our own faith has been used to further the lie that God works that way, too.

This Holy Week I refuse to participate in that lie anymore. It's time for us to change our relationship to the crowd noise. To figure out ways to move the ball down the field even

when the crowd is not rooting for us. To learn new cadences and signals and ways to communicate with each other. The noise is one of the ways we distract ourselves, and it is also one of the ways we really say something very important about ourselves.

Mobs don't just become violent—they are used for violent means because that is how someone chooses to use them. The way policing has developed around crowd control actually makes them more likely to become violent.

There is another truth for us to tell, for us to live. That God is not a violent force in this world. That God is not a cruel punisher. That God is not a child abuser or a murderer. The God we worship is a healer, a creative and compassionate, uniquely persuasive and powerful factor in every moment that unfolds. The God we worship is the creator of freedom that is true. The God we worship is a liberator. And that is why this day is one when perhaps we need more quiet—so we can hear the very stones tell us what it is we need to hear.

How we hurt over and over again each other is not the way things have to be. But it is the way things are. May we have the ears to hear who it is we are called to be in a world where both things are true.

Thanks be to God.