

“The Crowds”  
Matthew 21:1-11  
Palm Sunday

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Westminster, Greenville  
Ben Dorr

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### **When was the last time you were part of a crowd?**

Perhaps a Clemson or Carolina or Georgia football game?  
Who here has ever been to a Taylor Swift concert?  
Anyone been to a Beatles concert before?

What’s it like?

When you’re at a concert or a game, and there’s 50,000 other strangers there and you’re all cheering at the same time, you’re all singing the same song...what’s it like, to be part of the crowd?

It can be an exciting experience, right?

It can also be...an uncomfortable experience, depending on the crowd.

Anyone ever been to Times Square in NY City?

I was there once on New Year’s Eve, almost 30 years ago now.  
I wanted to be able to say I did it once in my life.

Watch the ball drop.

It was on my bucket list.

New Year’s Eve in NY City...let me tell you, once was enough!

I have no idea how many people were present that night, but what I do remember is being packed together so tightly, I no longer had control of which way I could move...the crowd leaned forward, I had to lean forward...the crowd swayed, I had to sway...it’s a bit unnerving, to be at the mercy of a large group of people, with no way to escape whatever the crowd decides to do...

**I'm inviting you to think about crowds this morning, what it's like to be part of a crowd...because today is Palm Sunday.**

A day when those who are praising Jesus, adoring Jesus, cheering for Jesus as he enters Jerusalem....are not only his disciples.

As Matthew writes, the cheering comes from the crowds:

*“A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees...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!’”*

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Now we'll get back to our text in just a moment.  
But I'd like to take a little side trip here.

Did you know that crowds are actually a fascinating subject of research? For example, do any of you remember the tv show, *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*

The game show in which contestants were given a series of questions, each progressively getting more difficult, and if the individual answered correctly 15 straight times, they won a million dollars.

Now if the contestant came across a question that they did not know the answer to, they had some options.

One of the options was to “phone a friend.”

In other words, pick the smartest person you know, and give them a call to see how they would answer the question. That was one approach.

Another lifeline was to poll the studio audience, this mass of strangers, and see what they thought the answer should be.

It turns out, after researchers studied all the episodes of the show, it turns out that choosing to phone a friend was a very good option, as friends got the answer right, nearly 2/3 of the time...65%.

What do you think that percentage of correct answers was for the studio audience? The crowd?

91%!

The journalist James Surowiecki cites this, in his fascinating book, *The Wisdom of Crowds*, as just one example of why crowds are NOT always the problem we make them out to be.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, crowds are complex.  
Sometimes, they can be a force for evil.  
A mob mentality...

All one has to do is remember the horrific public lynchings in our own country, or the terrible “Blood and Soil” march by white nationalists in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017...and you see the problem.

At the same time, any student of history knows that there is no March on Washington, no “I Have a Dream” speech in 1963 without the crowds...and 1989, the Berlin Wall doesn’t fall without the non-violent pressure and protests of the crowds...

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All of which brings us back to our text.

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<sup>1</sup> James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds*, New York: Vintage Books, 2005.

**What kind of crowd do we have on our hands  
in our text for today?**

This crowd that's welcoming Jesus, and waving branches—  
are they a faithful group, or a fickle group?

Let's take another look at what the crowd has to say.

They shout, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"

Do you know what Hosanna means?

It means "Save us."

It's a quote from Psalm 118.

The crowds hope that Jesus will be the one to save them.

Save them from what?

You know what.

Most scholars are in agreement here, that the crowds were desperate for salvation from the cruel fist of Roman oppression!

They wanted a revolt.

They wanted a kingdom that looked like the Davidic kingdom of old. And they thought that Jesus was just the one—  
with his healing and his teaching and his miracles—  
he was the one who could bring this kingdom about!

Of course, that's not what happened.

The Palm Sunday crowd...they loved Jesus.

They adored Jesus.

They followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem.

And yet, at the very same time...they did not understand Jesus.

**They had a preconceived idea about who Jesus was  
and what the love of God was supposed to do.**

This is an IMPORTANT pattern in Matthew's Gospel.  
The pattern of not grasping Jesus.  
Not understanding Jesus.  
Of having a preconceived idea of what God's love is supposed to  
do.

It's not just the crowds who behave this way.  
Stay with me here...

Do you remember John the Baptist?

In Matthew, chapter 3, John says of Jesus:

"...one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

At this point, John the Baptist is all about Jesus.

But then in chapter 11, Matthew tells us this:

"When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'"

In other words, John the Baptist is perplexed by Jesus.  
He's disappointed in Jesus.

He had a PRE-CONCEIVED idea in his mind of what the love of God was going to do through Jesus.

**Just like the crowds...**

Same thing happens with Peter in the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew.

Jesus says to his disciples:

“But who do you say that I am?”

Peter answers:

“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

And Jesus is so pleased with Peter, he tells Peter that he’s going to build his church on Peter, calls Peter his rock...and then, in the very next paragraph, Jesus begins to tell his disciples that “he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering...and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”

And that BAFFLES Peter.

It ANGERS Peter.

So Peter takes Jesus aside, and “began to rebuke [Jesus], saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.’”

To which Jesus says:

“Get behind me, Satan!”

Do you see what happened there?

Even Peter did not grasp Jesus, did not understand Jesus, because Peter had a preconceived idea of who Jesus was supposed to be and what the love of God was going to do.

Have you ever had a preconceived idea of what God’s love would look like in your life, and then your life didn’t turn out like that, and it left you wondering...what in the world is God up to here?

I remember Kate Bowler talking in an interview once about the stage 4 cancer diagnosis she received back in 2015. At the time, she had recently published a book on the prosperity gospel, which is the belief that God rewards you with health and wealth if you’re faithful in all the right ways. Now, this belief and how it came to hold such a firm grip on so many Christians in our country—it was interesting topic to write a book about, but it certainly wasn’t anything Bowler subscribed to in her own life of faith.

As she once put it, the problem with the prosperity gospel is that it “has taken a religion based on the contemplation of a dying man and stripped [that faith] of its call to surrender all.”<sup>2</sup>

In other words, she STUDIED the prosperity gospel.  
She didn’t BELIEVE in the prosperity gospel.  
Or she didn’t think she did.

Until her cancer diagnosis came along.  
And her initial response was: how could God do this to me??!!

Stage 4 cancer.  
Age 35.

She had done good things.  
She was a good person.  
She was a new mom, for crying out loud.

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<sup>2</sup> Kate Bowler, “Death, the Prosperity Gospel, and Me,” *The New York Times*, February 13, 2016, [Opinion | Death, the Prosperity Gospel and Me - The New York Times](#). I do not remember the source of the interview that Bowler gave.

If God was NOT going to reward her, Kate Bowler, with a reasonable amount of health...then what does God's love look like?

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Have you ever found yourself baffled by God's behavior?  
Wondering what the love of God looks like?

That's why we walk with Jesus during Holy Week.  
To be reminded of what God's love looks like.

Do any of you know the name August Landmesser?

There is a famous photograph, taken in Hamburg, Germany, in 1936. The photo is of shipyard workers, 100 or more, all facing the same direction in the light of the sun. They are all participating in the Nazi salute, heiling in unison, their right arms outstretched in loyal allegiance to Adolf Hitler.

I say all, but that's not true.

August Landmesser is the only person in the photo who is NOT going along with the crowd. As the historian Isabel Wilkerson notes, Landmesser "could not have known the murderous path [that] the hysteria around him would lead to. But [by 1936], he had already seen enough to reject it."

"He had joined the Nazi party...years before. By [the time of the photo], he knew firsthand that the Nazis were feeding Germans lies about Jews."

You see, Landmesser was “in love with a Jewish woman, but the recently enacted Nuremberg Laws had made their relationship illegal.”<sup>3</sup>

Their marriage application was denied.

In 1937, Landmesser was arrested when the family attempted to flee to Denmark.<sup>4</sup>

I did a little research on that photo this week, and to my surprise, I discovered that there’s actually a bit of debate about whether it’s Landmesser in that photo, or another man, named Gustav Wegert, who is refusing to salute.

Wegert’s own son thinks it’s his dad, who spent his years in Germany, during the Third Reich, refusing to make this salute, day after day, because of his Christian faith.<sup>5</sup>

Ultimately, no one knows for sure.

But it doesn’t matter.

What matters is the courage of that person.

What matters is that whoever he was,  
 whether he knew it or not,  
 the love of the living God was clearly at work  
 in that person...

Just like the love of the living God is clearly at work in you.

This is the beginning of Holy Week. And I imagine that next Sunday, Easter Sunday, there will be large crowds at many churches throughout Greenville.

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<sup>3</sup> Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, New York: Random House, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> [August Landmesser: The Lone Man Refusing to Do the Nazi Salute, 1936 - Rare Historical Photos](#)

<sup>5</sup> Wolfgang Wegert, [1936 - Just one refused the Nazi salute](#)

But this week, the crowds will do other things.

They'll shop, they'll consume, they'll entertain,  
they'll go about their lives...

But not you.  
That's not how I picture you this week.

I see you engaging in some sacrificial act of love for your neighbor  
this week...a neighbor who is hurting,  
a neighbor who is helpless,  
a neighbor who's a stranger,  
a neighbor you don't get along with...  
any child of God who happens to be your neighbor.

Because that's why Jesus went to Jerusalem, right?

For his neighbors, and his disciples,  
and his enemies, the casual observer,  
and the person in the crowd—  
he went to Jerusalem to make it clear...  
that THIS...[point to cross]  
this is what the love of God looks like.

Amen.