OF CROWDS AND FOLLOWERS
Matthew 21:6-11; 27:15-26

Like the worship service in which it was preached, this sermon was designed in two parts: the first part celebrating Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem; the second part moving the story toward the cross.

Part I

AND THE CROWD CRIED, “HOSANNA!”
Matthew 21:6-11

It wasn’t exactly Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade, but it was a pretty big deal for that little part of the world. They had no mammoth balloons of cartoon characters, no bands, no floats, no celebrity emcees. There was no television to broadcast it around the country. But Jesus was there, and that made it a very big deal.

After three years of public ministry, Jesus was one hot commodity. Had He lived in our day, He would have been hounded by the paparazzi—invading His privacy, snapping pictures, a hundred flashing lights in his face every time they could steal a shot. He would have been on magazine covers, would have made the list of People magazine’s “The 25 Most Intriguing People.” He would have been a celebrity—and not just famous for being famous either, but famous for His mighty acts and deeds.

It’s not that Jesus tried to be famous or anything. He really didn’t court all the attention He received. Truth is, Jesus enjoyed quiet times and solitude as much or more than the attention of the crowds. But crowds were drawn to Him nonetheless. And it’s easy to see why. Jesus did things no one else had done or could do—supernatural things, miraculous things, Messiah-things. He healed the sick. He stopped a storm. He walked on water. He took a boy’s sack lunch and fed thousands. He made war on demons, casting them out of the people they terrorized, restoring those people to sanity and wholeness, to family and community. Two words we way overuse in our culture are amazing and awesome. Well, Jesus did amazing things, awesome things, things nobody else could do.

And word gets around about somebody like that. Even though Jesus usually told the recipients of His healings not to blab it all over town, people
just couldn’t keep it to themselves. And how could they anyway? Suppose you’d been blind all your life, led around by the hand wherever you went, and one day Jesus healed you. What do you say when a friend sees you walking around with 20/20 vision and asks, “What in the world happened to you?” Do you say, “Gee … I don’t know. Umm … I’ve been eating a lot of carrots lately?” Like who’s going to believe that? Nobody, that’s who. So word got out. Jesus’ fame began to spread like prairie fire. Add Jesus mighty deeds to the messianic expectations that were already in the air, and you might as well put gas on a fire. People flocked around Jesus like moths around a flame.

Most everybody in Jesus’ day recognized the names Pontius Pilate, King Herod, and Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus drew a crowd most everywhere He went. Many wanted His healing touch. Some loved to listen to His stories. Others were just curious and wanted to see this celebrity up close. You know, just in case Jesus ever amounted to anything lasting, they wanted to be able to tell their grandchildren, “Yes, I saw Jesus with my own eyes. Yes sir, I was close enough to touch him.” I don’t know, maybe people then were as celebrity-crazy as people now.

Jesus was a celebrity in many ways, but He was not without His critics. He was not universally popular. For the most part, the common folks gave Him a thumbs-up, while the majority of the religious leaders gave Him a thumbs-down. They didn’t like Jesus much. Fact is, some of them hated him with a passion. They felt threatened by Him. In every encounter with them, Jesus ate their lunch. They could never outwit Him, never outsmart Him, never outthink Him. And Jesus didn’t keep the Laws like they thought He should have kept them. They especially thought Jesus made light of the Sabbath. And between Jesus healing a paralytic with the words, “Son, your sins are forgiven,” and then turning around and healing a man with a shriveled hand on the Sabbath in the synagogue, that was about all the religious leaders could take. And they pretty much had it in for Jesus the rest of the way—believing Him to be an out-of-control, law-breaking, blaspheming, God-pretender. So whether for good or for bad, Jesus was the talk of Israel in those days.

And now it was time for Jesus’ mission to reach its goal. Jesus wanted to make it to Jerusalem for the Passover. And He was going to make it sure enough. They got up the Mount of Olives, just outside Jerusalem, and stopped for break. But this was more than a rest stop; this break had purpose. They didn’t stop to rub their aching feet. They stopped because Jesus had a little mission to accomplish. He sent two of His disciples to get it done. The whole
thing sounded like something out of a spy novel. The two disciples were to go to the village up ahead. Jesus told them that they would find a donkey and her colt tied up there. “Untie them,” Jesus said, “and bring them to me.” The two disciples looked a bit puzzled at the mission. It showed in their eyes. And it looked like they were thinking, “Okay, You’re telling us to go steal a couple of donkeys. A fellow can get hung for something like that.” Jesus must have sensed their anxiety, so He quickly added, “If anyone says anything to you, your code words are, ‘The Lord needs them.’ Just say that and you’re home free.”

Don’t you suspect that by now Jesus’ disciples were sensing that their entry into Jerusalem was going to be different from their entry into a hundred other dusty little towns in Israel? Did the disciples who knew their Bible and believed Jesus to be Messiah wonder if the entry they were about to make into Jerusalem was somehow connected to the prophecy of Zechariah? “See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” Could that prophecy be about this entrance? Surely not, they must have reasoned. Messiah’s bound to enter Jerusalem with more boldness than riding on a donkey’s colt. A tall white stallion with broad chest and flowing blond mane, armored for war, would be the ticket for Messiah. That’s the way conquering generals entered a city. Why not Messiah?

The two disciples who brought the donkey colt to Jesus laid their cloaks on the animals and Jesus sat on the colt. Now Jesus was ready to make His entrance into the Jerusalem. And talk about a crowd. It was, writes Matthew, “a very large crowd”—old men with long beards and regal robes, women dressed more humbly, children dancing and playing among the crowd, mothers chasing them down. As Jesus made His way into the city, the crowd began throwing their cloaks on the road. I know that sounds odd to our ears, but it was a custom of the day for a visiting dignitary. We roll out the red carpet; they threw down their cloaks. And with knives flashing in the sunlight, some in the crowd began to strip nearby trees of their branches. They threw them in the road too. People began to circle Jesus, some behind, some in front. And while there were no bands in this parade, there was dancing and shouting and singing. “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” It was quite a spectacle really. The whole city was abuzz about it. People were asking who it was that was stirring up such a fuss. That man was Jesus—a man who never seemed to be much in for fanfare, yet a man who made anything but a quiet entrance on this day.
Don’t you imagine with the growing hostility of the religious leaders toward Jesus, that some of the disciples were a little nervous about going to Jerusalem? Perhaps this reception Jesus received was quite a relief to them. More than once Jesus had told the disciples that He would go to Jerusalem and suffer and die. The incredible, royal response Jesus received might have eased a few minds: “Jesus may someday die in Jerusalem, but it sure won’t be today. It sure won’t be this time around. Just look at these crowds!”

They sure seemed hospitable on that Sunday. But you never know about crowds. Were they sincere? Or did many of them just get swept up by the momentum of numbers? People may act very differently in crowds than they might act alone. There’s security in a crowd. There’s anonymity in a crowd. And there’s pressure too. When a crowd is moving one way, it’s hard to move against them. Just try walking into this sanctuary when church is over and everyone else is walking out. It’s hard to move against the crowd. Crowds create the pressure to conform—for good or for bad. And crowds give us a scapegoat too. “He couldn’t help it, your Honor,” claimed his attorney. “He was the victim of mob mentality. He was swept up by the crowd. He would never have done this were it not for the crowd. He would never do such a thing alone.” We’re talking about mob mentality here … about crowds.

What about this crowd on Palm Sunday. They were shouting, “Hip, hip, hooray!” and singing, “For Jesus is a jolly good fellow.” They were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” This means, “Save us now, O son of the king.” This was a messianic shout, but they were looking for a different kind of Messiah. They were looking for a military leader—a Goliath-killing, sword-wielding, Roman-slaughtering hero who would establish Israel as lord of all nations. And Jesus was not that. Still, the reception and the cheers were wide and loud, but were they deep? Were they sincere? Or were they just swept up in the thrill of the moment, only to be frustrated later by unrealized expectations?

Since Matthew tells us so little about Jesus’ interaction with the crowd, it’s hard for us to know just what Jesus is thinking. But apparently, Jesus is not nearly as enamored by the crowd as the crowd is by Him. There’s no report that Jesus rallied the crowd and made a speech, no report that Jesus let them sweep Him off the colt and onto their shoulders in some victory walk through the gates of Jerusalem. It makes you wonder if Jesus was almost oblivious to their praise—as if He knew something about this crowd that His followers did not know.
But there was this one particular thing that does seem a harbinger of trouble on this happy day. Once Jesus got through the adoring crowd and into the city, folks in the city noticed the uproar and the commotion and were asking the crowd, “What’s going on here? What’s all the fuss? Who’s the man on the colt?”

“This is Jesus,” the crowds answered, “the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.” Did you hear that? The crowds called Jesus a prophet. But as Jesus had revealed to those closest to Him and as His deeds had revealed to anyone paying attention, Jesus was certainly more than a prophet. He is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the Living God. The crowds didn’t see that. They just saw a prophet. And that should have troubled every follower of Jesus—because here they were in Jerusalem, and anybody who knows anything about Jerusalem knows this: Jerusalem was a good place for a prophet to get himself killed.

Part II

AND THE CROWD CRIED “CRUCIFY!”

So much for coronation. This week was about confrontation. Once Jesus dismounted that donkey colt, it didn’t take long for Him to stir up a hornet’s nest. He went straight to the temple, which looked more like a flea market than a temple, and straightened out that situation pronto. People were selling sacrificial animals and changing money and making a killing at the expense of the poor, and Jesus wouldn’t stand for it. He turned over their tables and toppled their benches. Doves freed and flying out of there, coins scattered like billiard balls after a good break. People scrambling to gather up what they could while Jesus scolded them for turning a house of prayer into a den of thieves. The religious leaders did not give Jesus an “amen” for this action. They didn’t thank Him for setting them straight.

But Jesus didn’t seem to care. He set up shop at the temple and healed the sick who came to him there. The kids loved him. They were still singing the song they had sung to Jesus on His way into the city, “Hosanna to the Son of David.” The chief priests and the teachers of the law finally had enough. They got in Jesus’ face about the song. Jesus quoted them the Scripture about how God had ordained praise from the lips of children and infants. And then
Jesus left town for the night. If this was going to be a week of coronation, it was going to have to get better than this. The powers that be were already down on Jesus and about the only crowd left to praise Him were a bunch of kids. As glad as Jesus’ followers were to enter the city that morning, they must have been just as glad to leave it that night.

I wonder if some would have rather left Jerusalem altogether and headed back to the security of Galilee, but Jesus would have none of that. He was on a mission. He was in Jerusalem for a purpose. He had business to tend to in that place. He went back into Jerusalem the next day. In fact, He went back all week long. And with each day, the temperature in the city was rising to the boiling point. Jesus would teach; the religious leaders would badger him with questions. Some were sincere; most were not. Sometimes it was the Pharisees that dogged Him, other times the Sadducees. They all took their best shot. But Jesus would not back down. He spoke to them frankly and directly. The religious leaders were unaccustomed to such boldness. Like you and me, they much preferred pointing out the sins of others rather than being called to account for sins of their own. But Jesus did that. He didn’t cut them any slack or mince any words. Early in the week, rumor had it that the religious leaders were looking for a way to arrest Jesus, but they were afraid of the crowd. The crowd wasn’t ready to crown Jesus king; they weren’t convinced He was Messiah, but they still held him to be a prophet. The attitude of the crowd kept the religious leaders in check. They didn’t want to cause a riot and bring the wrath of Rome down on their heads. But they wouldn’t quit looking for a way to get Him either.

The tensions reached a peak at mid-week when Jesus took on the Pharisees. He called them hypocrites, blind guides, sons of hell, a brood of snakes, and whitewashed tombs that are beautiful on the outside but on the inside full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. No surprise that they didn’t like that speech. But don’t get the wrong idea about Jesus. He didn’t hate the religious leaders. He loved them. He understood that sometimes it takes a 2x4 or a sharp word to get someone’s attention. Jesus loved them. He wept over them, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem,” he said, “you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.” Don’t ever think that Jesus didn’t love these people. He loved all Jerusalem with all His heart.
Jesus’ followers loved Jerusalem too. They were very impressed with the temple. And when they called Jesus’ attention to its beauty, He began a lengthy discourse about its destruction. He spoke about the destruction of Jerusalem and the last days of the earth. He told parables as a means to make His points and ready His followers for those days.

But it must have been hard for Jesus’ disciples to imagine being ready for those last days when they weren’t even ready for the next couple of days. So Jesus quit talking about last days and started talking about His last day. He said He would be handed over to be crucified. He’d talked like that a few times before, but the disciples never understood what He meant …

Until it happened. And when it happened it happened quickly. Jesus and His disciples ate the Passover supper in Jerusalem. But this occasion was not marked by warm conversation and joking around. This was serious. Jesus said there would be betrayal and denial in the group. At the end of the supper He broke bread and gave it to the disciples, calling it His body. Then He passed the cup, calling it “my blood of the covenant.” Strange talk. There is a haunting feeling about it all …

Which no doubt continued as Jesus and His group made their way to Gethsemane. Jesus said He needed to pray. He asked His disciples to pray too. They tried to pray, but mostly their prayers turned to snores and they fell asleep. But their sleep was rudely interrupted by the noise of an approaching crowd—torches flickering in the night casting eerie shadows over the faces of the crowd, footsteps beating a path straight to Jesus. Judas was leading the pack. He met Jesus and kissed him. And when he did, the crowd seized Jesus and arrested Him. Peter tried to fight back, but Jesus would have none of it. It was a strange sight—a large crowd against Jesus, yet Jesus seemed to be the one in control. The rest of Jesus’ followers didn’t know what to do. Up to this point, the crowds had been in their favor, but this crowd was not. So they panicked. They turned tail and ran.

Jesus’ followers didn’t see Jesus again until Governor Pilate, the Roman ruler in Jerusalem, paraded Jesus before the crowd. There was a custom that at Passover-time the Romans would release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. It was pretty obvious that Pilate found Jesus to be an innocent man. And it was made more obvious by Pilate’s choice of prisoners to set against Jesus as to who would be released. Pilate picked the biggest scoundrel of them all—Barabbas. It was a no-brainer. Pilate assumed, the crowd would choose
Jesus. What had Jesus done? Heal people. Love people. Offer people hope. Where’s the crime in that? Sure, he broke the Pharisee’s Sabbath rules on occasion. And He didn’t always show proper respect for the authority of the religious leaders, but what’s that compared to the notorious crimes of Barabbas? Surely the crowd would choose Jesus. Many of these same people had been singing His praises on Sunday.

But crowds are fickle. I don’t know how they did it, but the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask that Barabbas be freed—Barabbas. Pilate asked, “Which of the two do you want me to release to you?” The crowd answered, “Barabbas.” Surely there were some calls for Jesus out of that mob, but Barabbas won the day.

Pilate was stunned. He couldn’t believe his ears. The crowd wanted ... Barabbas? “What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?” Pilate asked.

“Crucify Him!” shot back the crowd.

“Why?” asked Pilate, “What crime has he committed?”

But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify Him! Crucify Him! Crucify HIM!” The crowd was unruly—on the edge of a riot.

Pilate must have sensed that. So he washed his hands of the whole mess, had Jesus flogged, and handed Him over to be crucified.

What started as a coronation ended as a crucifixion. And the crowd played its part. But don’t miss the story underneath the story. The crowd is not the reason for Jesus’ death. God willed this. Because of love, God willed Jesus’ death so that you and I could be forgiven for our sins. Yes, the religious leaders and Pilate and the crowd played their parts, but this was God’s doing. Jesus could have stopped it at any time, but He went through with it so that He might save us from our sins and give us eternal life. Jesus went through with it because there was no other way to save us. As Paul would later interpret this even in 2 Corinthians 5:21: “He who knew no sin had to become sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God.” We can’t save ourselves. None of us can keep the Law in every detail. No sacrifice we make can change our hearts. The blood of animals can’t save us; only Jesus’ blood can save us. Only the sacrifice of Jesus in our place can save us from our sins
and bring us into relationship with God. And Jesus was willing to do this in obedience to the Father. In the words of the great modern hymn:

How deep the Father’s love for us,
How vast beyond all measure.
That He should give His only Son
To make a wretch His treasure.
How great the pain of searing loss;
The Father turns His face away
As wounds which mar the Chosen One
Bring many sons to glory.1

How indescribable is this love of God that saves us! How blind we can be to its beauty and its cost and its meaning! How easy it is to miss it.

**The Holy Week crowd missed it for sure.** The crowd. Crowds can be so fickle. From “Hosanna” to “Crucify.” From “Crown Him king” to “Kill Him dead.” And such a change in less than a week. Crowds sway too much. They are ignited for good or for evil as easily as the strike of a match. Crowds are unpredictable, undependable, fickle.

But look around. Are we not a crowd of sorts today? Do you think the gathering of a crowd impresses Jesus? It doesn’t. Jesus didn’t come to build a crowd; He came to build a church. Crowds are fickle. Jesus understands that. The devil does too. Noticing the large crowd a church was attracting, a demon said to the devil, “What are we going to do? Look at the crowd gathered at that church! How can we ever overcome them?” Said the devil to the demon, “Don’t worry about that crowd. They’re praising God on Sunday. They’ll be okay on Monday. It’s just a little habit they’ve acquired.”

What about you? Are you part of the church or part of the crowd? Do you praise God on Sunday then forget Him on Monday, or betray Him or deny Him? Do you wave a palm branch at Him on one day, an angry fist the next, or maybe you just yawn in His direction? Do you let the people around you dictate the depth of your devotion to Christ? Are you just a face in the crowd?

Or are you a part of the church, a follower of Christ? Do you praise God on Sunday, then *walk* with Him on Monday? Do you stand by Christ no matter

---

1Stuart Townend, 1995.
what? Even when your circumstances are confusing? Even when you don’t understand what God is up to in your life? Even when others around you would want to crucify Him all over again? Do you follow Him? Worship Him? Love Him? Serve Him? No matter what?

I read about a church that has a mural of the crucifixion scene painted in their foyer. But it’s a bit different from some of those kinds of scenes you’ve seen painted before. In this scene, the faces in the crowd around the cross are not faces painted from the artist’s imagination; they are the faces of members of that church.

Today begins Holy Week. Over these next several days, Jesus will attract quite a crowd. Don’t just be another face in that crowd. Jesus didn’t come to build a crowd; He came to build a church. So follow Jesus. Follow Him if it means a parade. Follow Him if it means a cross. Don’t hang back in the crowd. Step out of the crowd and follow Jesus.