

The Triumphal Entry. Matthew 21: 1-11 St. Augustine's in-theWoods. 4/13/14
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I remember them well! The Hogs. The Washington Redskin Hogs. If you've ever seen a Redskins game the cameras always cut to a bunch of overweight guys cross-dressing, and wearing rubber pig snouts! They do it at every home game because the Redskins' offensive line became known in the 1980s as "the Hogs" and the name stuck.

That happens a lot in sports! Just look at pictures from a Seahawks or Sounders game and you'll see people painted green and blue.

Apparently the rules of social interaction get suspended for sports fans – what, pretty much anywhere else, would get you certified as crazy is perfectly acceptable when it comes to a sporting event. In the crowd, strangers hug one another when the team makes a last-minute winning score. In the crowd people go horse screaming their support at the absolute top of their lungs.

It's not new that crowds change social norms. Normally mild-mannered people are transformed into fearless and out-spoken individuals. People do things when they're part of a crowd they would never do as individuals.

When we are a part of a crowd united in a common purpose how we act changes. There's unity of purpose in a crowd. We are much more willing to challenge social and cultural barriers when we're in a crowd than as individuals.

The power of a crowd can transform almost anyone, it brings out a unity of purpose, mutual support, courage, determination.

Crowds change social norms. Whether they are for sport, political protest, or public worship, gathering with others inevitably changes our mood and actions.

A friend – a San Francisco 49'ers fan – once told me that, after going to an 49'ers Colts game in Indianapolis wearing a 49'ers cap she never felt so alone. Which is to say that crowds aren't completely homogenous in action or intent, even if almost any self-reflective person will say that they felt different when part of a crowd sharing a common purpose.

Perhaps that's what makes a crowd, at least in part: a common purpose, a unity of vision.

We have gathered this day as a crowd, a group with a common purpose and unity of vision. And, today, we remember and celebrate another gathering crowd, re-enacting in a very simple way their actions on a spring day nearly 2,000 years ago.

Titles get given to the events of that day – "The Triumphal Entry" is one of them. After centuries of usage that phrase has come to define this day, and it captures the reality of the moment, even if we are always aware of the full implications of both the name and the events it describes.

On that day the crowd turns Jesus' entry into Jerusalem into something special, unique, powerful, and – yes – dangerous. Dangerous because it represents a very real threat to the established order, the “way things are”, and, as a consequence, dangerous to those how participate; now they are potential targets of nervous and violent men, soldiers of Rome.

Any time you put together uncertainty and insecurity with the ability and willingness to exercise extreme violence it's not hard to predict what will happen – the phrase “power-keg” comes to mind. The only question is this: who is going to die?

The simple presence of any Jewish crowd in Jerusalem to celebrate the central moment of it's faith – a moment having to do with freedom from oppression and slavery – made the potential for violence very real. What that crowd – or the part of it closest to Jesus – did next made it inevitable.

They tore down palm fronds – used by pilgrims journeying to Jerusalem for another festival – of Booths – palms that symbolized an invitation for Yahweh to dwell with the pilgrims on their journey. Then they laid them in the path of a man known for his challenge to “the way things are”, to the accepted order, a man who himself was making a statement by choosing to ride toward a gate only kings used to enter Jerusalem, on an animal that – when ridden through that gate – was The Sign of the arrival of a peaceable king.

Like the sports fans of our own age the crowd cried out in unison. They used a phrase we use week-in, week-out: “Hosanna. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord”. At least, as Matthew reports it that's what they said. Because of the gospels' interpretation of that word “Hosanna” it has come to mean for Christians “Praise him”. But in the context of that day used by Jesus' fellow Jews, “Hosanna” meant something different. The word comes from the Aramaic “hoshia-na”, and it's closest meaning was this: “rescue us”.

Symbolic act layered on symbolic act. Words with multi-layered meaning. And - in the following week – symbolic acts were turned to literal ones. The way Jesus was able to ‘disappear’ each day after teaching in public, in the presence of Roman soldiers, no doubt, couldn't act publically without provoking bloodshed – the way Jesus was able to disappear was a testimony to the Jewish crowd willing to shield him from the occupying army

Rome was used to reading symbolic acts and words – they practically invented the genre. And they made a regular symbolic statement themselves each time they came up from their coastal base to Jerusalem. Led by Consul Pilate, ahead of maybe 500 soldiers in full battle armor they entered the City of peace at the same time as Jesus but on the other side of the city representing the Roman commitment to eternal War; salvation through battle and victory .

They also knew that symbolic acts led to actual acts, ones that destabilized the situation, and they saw that with Jesus. If there was a final straw in the story of Jesus' last week it wasn't Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, it was the way the crowd continued to protect him. As the great festival day approached the stakes just kept getting higher, the crowd more energized by Jesus' teaching . Everything Pilate did later that week was designed to subdue, and mock the people – Jews all –

after what he would have perceived as provocative act built on provocative act. Those actions would include making an example of some prominent leader quickly, efficiently, inexorably AND to do so in such a way that he wasn't risking a popular uprising to rescue Jesus. There should be no surprise that the final acts in the drama of Jesus of Nazareth are done at night or in the early hours of the morning. When everyone woke up on that day we call Good Friday it was "Fait accompli" – too late to rally around Jesus, he was already on a cross. Nothing, now, that the crowd can do except rage silently and feel powerless.

Perhaps the key word in this whole passage – the pivot point just as we've seen pivot points throughout Lent – is that familiar one: Hosanna. "Hoshia-na". Rescue us. Because Rome would know only too well from whom the Jews wanted to be rescued: Rome. Rome the Empire. Rome the poster child for injustice, Rome the controller of a world where the "haves" were enormously wealthy, and the "have-nots" were barely making ends meet, or worse. Rome the poster child for the violence and brutality of the strong and powerful imposed on the weak and defenseless; Rome the poster child for exploitation and manipulation, and heartless cruelty.

Crowds across the ages still cry "Hoshia-na"; it's the ageless cry demanding justice, longing for freedom. Crowds in our own day and age still make that cry. Hoshia-na; rescue us.

This day unlike any other we make that cry. We cry out for ourselves, and we cry out for all those whose voices our world cannot or does not want to hear, for whom justice is denied, on whom violence is perpetrated.

And this day asks questions of us, too. Will you hold the branches of palm high? Will you proclaim peace AND then act to try and bring it about? Will you march with Jesus?