

# THE STORY OF THE CHEERING CROWDS

Luke 19:28-40

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20 March 2016

It's a question you've heard many times before. "If you knew you only had one year to live, how would you spend your time?" I first remember encountering that question as an ice-breaker in a church state-wide youth event when I was in high school. It's the basis of the song, "Live Like You Were Dying." At the end of worship today, we'll sing a song with the line, "This is the first day of the rest of your life..." Same message. The phrase, "Carpe diem" - reminds us to seize the day, make the most of the gift of time. Same message.

Most biblical scholars believe that Jesus lived his entire life believing that the end of the world - as he knew it - was coming soon. Not necessarily a dramatic ending as the Book of Revelation describes, but certainly a major change. Something monumental was about to happen. At the time and place of Jesus' birth, people were looking everywhere for signs of the Messiah, because the appearance of the Messiah would signal this monumental shift.

For centuries, since the time of the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures, Jewish people had believed that God was going to intervene directly in the lives of the people. So they were waiting. And their anticipation was intensified because life had become so brutally difficult for them, under the thumb of the Roman Empire. The lives of the poor, and most of them were poor, were lives of struggle for survival. It was a time of political uprising, revolution, as is often the case when the gap between the rich and the poor widens.

This is the cultural milieu into which Jesus is born. His primary message is this: "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand." In other words, "God is about to usher in a new kind of world. Let's get ready for it." It's hard for us to completely put our feet in those shoes. How would it feel to not think about the future? To truly live for today? It's what Jesus seemed to do. He lived in the present moment. He wasn't nostalgic - he didn't hearken back to the past. He looked around

him and said, "What am I called to say to these people now? Who needs healing now? Who can I show kindness to at this moment, in this place?"

Let me say this. I think Jesus would be different had he been born in a different time and place. If Jesus were here today, he would care deeply about the future. He would be preaching about the environment, the beautiful and fragile world God has given us to protect. He would be teaching us how to build a society that looks after the needs of the most vulnerable.

But in his day, the orientation was different; the perspective was short-term only. In the story we now call the Palm Sunday Story, he enters the gates of the city of Jerusalem, what is now called the old city or the walled city, for the feast of the Passover. There's no reason to think that he knew, for certain, that this week would be his last. He knew that it was a possibility. He knew the time was coming. He'd made too many people mad. He'd made the Roman authorities work too hard, keeping up with the crowds generated by his popularity. He'd made the religious officials jealous, too, and they were also angry because of the new ways he interpreted the law, the new way he had of living out his religious convictions. Change is always threatening, and now it threatened Jesus' very life.

He arrives in Jerusalem with his disciples for the celebration of the Passover. The population of the city swells; it's like Times Square on New Year's Eve. People who know him recognize him and flock towards him. Those who don't know him join the crowd - "hey, I've heard of this Jesus guy - let's go see him with our own eyes!" Some are merely curious. "Hosanna! Save us! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." Those who know him, those who have heard him speak, those who have witnessed his dealings and his kindness treat him as the king he is, the king of their hearts, the king of their hopes. They throw down palm branches to carpet his entrance into the city, for no king enters with dust kicking up. He deserves a royal welcome into the city. "Hosanna!" they shout.

Here is a picture I took in January of the gate Jesus used. It's now obviously not in use, and never will be, as there's a cemetery right in front of it.

Jesus is well aware that at the other end of the city, the Roman soldiers are entering through another gate. It's a very different kind of procession. They're making a show of their military might, letting people know that they're in charge, that their authority will not be questioned. They inspire loyalty only through fear and intimidation.

And in the synagogue, it's business as usual. The poor people come to worship, where they're charged exorbitant prices to buy a pigeon to sacrifice at the altar.

In some ways, Palm Sunday is just another day for Jesus to live his life. Another day to exemplify an alternative to the empire and the oppression and fear it represents, another day to exemplify an alternative to the corruption of the religious establishment. This is another day in the life of Jesus, so what does he do? He shows, through his actions and through his words, that there is an alternative way of life. The alternative way of life that he embodies is a life of inclusion; anyone can be a part of the Jesus Parade. Even the skeptics, even those who are there just for the day, just for the moment. The alternative life that he embodies is a life of compassion. If he is moved by someone who is in need of healing, or forgiveness, or a kind word, he will stop and offer it. You don't have to pay for it, you don't have to sacrifice an animal in order to receive it, you don't have to deserve it, you don't have to ask for it. Even if it's the sabbath, the day set aside for no work whatsoever, Jesus will do the work of compassion. The alternative life that Jesus embodies is the life of courage. He doesn't have to enter Jerusalem. He could have stayed in Bethany, at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. He could have returned to Capernaum or Nazareth. But this is where he believes God wants him to go, so he goes. He's not unafraid of death. We'll remember that when we read about him in the Garden of Gethsemane on Thursday night and here's a picture I took there - he'll be praying, "If it is possible, take this cup away from me." He doesn't want to spend that night alone. He's not unafraid. But the fear of death doesn't change the way he lives. He lives a courageous life of radical welcome, compassion that knows no bounds. And we who bear his name are called to that same kind of life.

There's no day better than today to begin living that way. Our situation is so similar to his. We, too, are faced with messages and values that run absolutely counter to those of Jesus. There are religious people in our day and age who claim that being a good Christian is about keeping people out...keep out the people who disagree, keep out the people who vote differently or believe differently, keep out the foreigners. We are called to be an alternative, to proclaim and live a different message, a message of inclusion and grace.

Every political commentator I have listened to or read over the past several months has admitted that the next few months are going to be full of negative rhetoric. Our presidential election is shaping up to be one of the nastiest and most divisive in our history. How will we conduct ourselves as people who bear the name of Christ? How will we be different? How will we look and sound different? Can we continue to model civil discourse? Can we prove that people can disagree without being disagreeable? Can we teach our children that we expect better of them? For we are teaching, right here in our building, the future leaders of this nation. What we teach them matters. In preschool, in Sunday School, in Confirmation and youth group. Are they learning to embrace the values that we hold dear? Are they learning that each person is worthy of dignity and respect? It's never been more important than now for us to support our Christian Education programs, our youth ministry, our Easter offering which will fund our junior high mission trip. The future of the Jesus movement depends on it.

On Palm Sunday, the crowds were cheerful, shouting, "Hosanna!" But here is the sad truth. By Friday, some of the very same people turned against Jesus, shouting, "Crucify Him!" Why? Because it's so easy to be swayed by the crowds. It's so easy to become judgmental, and unwelcoming, and fearful.

Jesus was willing to walk to his death so that we would remember his life and his lessons. May we not live as if all of that was in vain. Let us live as if every day is a precious gift, an opportunity to proclaim hope and justice, the values of Jesus that we will not let die. This week or any week. For this is the first day of the rest of our lives.