

Palm/Passion Sunday, Year B – March 28, 2021

John 12:12-16, Mark 15

Epiphany, Winnipeg Paul Sartison

I want to remind you who was there that afternoon. It was hot and dry and the sun was beating down and everyone gathered by the roadside while Jesus rode into town. Just over there, right up front, right by the road, there's someone crazily waving a palm branch and they're calling out Hosanna! Hosanna! Help us! Save us!" Or just plain "Praise the Lord!" They're really getting into it. Deep inside, they know that Jesus is the one they've been waiting for and they're excited and they're shouting just like we don't shout around here and they believe and it's just great to be there. They're waving that palm branch to honour Jesus, they're waving that palm just like all creation waves and celebrates and rejoices in the presence of its creator, they're waving that palm because it makes a nice cool breeze when it's so hot out there in the sun.

Just across the road from them, there's someone about four rows back who doesn't have a palm branch and who doesn't want a palm branch and actually finds the whole experience kind of awkward. She's not so given to enthusiastic outbursts, and even if everyone in the crowd was waving branches she'd feel kind of goofy waving branches and making a fuss like that. And she's got that smart voice – smart as in kind of wise – that says, "Just because everyone else is doing it doesn't mean you have to." She's not so sure about following the crowd, and joining in all the chants – Hosanna, hosanna – just doesn't sit right.

As Jesus goes through the crowd, the ones he's passed by close in behind as though they're pushing him into Jerusalem. And back on the road a ways there's someone who just wishes they'd get off the road and stop blocking traffic because he's got to get to the market to sell his goods. He's just trying to make a living.

That's not all, but that's who was there that afternoon.

I want to remind you who was there a few days later, on another hot sunny day. There was a crowd gathered outside city hall, and the governor is standing on the steps. Jesus, looking the worse for wear, is standing beside him and Pilate, the governor, asks the crowd what they want to do with Jesus. And the crowd calls out, Crucify him!”

There’s someone way at the back of the crowd who’s calling out the loudest, and it’s not that she’s bad or heartless or cruel, she just thinks that Jesus is trouble for the nation and for the people, and someone like that shouldn’t just keep on being able to say whatever they think, like Jesus seems to do. And just to the right of her there’s someone who sort of joins in with the crowd but doesn’t really like all the noise. They’re not sure whether they even agree with what they themselves are saying, but in a crowd like that where everyone seems to agree you’re going to look kind of strange if you keep quiet, and if the crowd can turn against Jesus like that what will they do if they think you’re on his side? Crowds can be like that, you know. It’s hard not to follow. It’s no excuse, no excuse at all. But sometimes it’s hard not to follow.

And there’s a young man walking by, whose trying to find a doctor because his kid is sick...and he’s got other things on his mind....he wishes the crowd would just get out of the way. Stop blocking traffic.

That’s who was there that afternoon. That’s not all, but these ones were there.

And a few days later, that day when the sun was shining but then it just stopped shining, remember who was there? Just Mary and Mary and Salome, and many other women. Probably traumatized by what they've seen happen to their friend, just like anyone would be.

There's a Roman soldier. Waiting for the end of his shift? Traumatized by another day of watching this kind of thing happen? Moved to believe something he never would have thought he would: "This is God's son?"

There's really no one else. Some of Jesus' friends ran and hid because the whole thing is terrifying. A lot of the crowd have just left now because there's nothing left to see. And a lot of people probably weren't there because by now crucifying people is just what everybody knows those crazy Romans and their army do. You don't even notice after awhile, or you just stay home and stay put and stay quiet and stay out of trouble.

You see, the thing is, although we might have learned it a different way it's not really a religious story. It's a bunch of scenes all filled with people. There are people who are firmly on this side of the issue, and there are people on that side. There are so many who are sure and there are so many don't quite know where they stand, there are some who are just following the crowd and some who will say they're just following orders, and there are some who resist, or who show up and stay there even if it might not be safe.

And there are some who just wish everyone would get out of the way and stop blocking traffic.

And of course we know who else was there. Jesus, riding into town, confident or afraid, sure or unsure himself. Jesus, staying so silent when the judge calls on him to defend himself. He used to be so full of stories but now he keeps quiet until he wonders aloud why God has abandoned him.

That's who else was there in those days: in the middle of all those crowds, in court, stumbling up the road carrying a heavy cross; getting some relief from a bystander named Simon; alone but not alone because those women stayed with him to the end. In so many ways it's an everyday story, because we can see a bit of ourselves or a lot of ourselves in those crowds. Maybe I was in *both* of the crowds, maybe you were too. Maybe all of us were reluctant or certain or afraid or strong, all at the same time. Maybe we are that way.

And in the middle of all those crowds where we were...where we are...Jesus is there, for everyone in the crowd; giving up all he has for everyone in the crowd. The crowd on this side or that side, going like this (wave a branch) or going like this (shake a fist).

Look for the crowd this week wherever you are...on the street, on the screen, on the page, in the stands....that's where Jesus is. The life of the world given for the life of all. AMEN.