



The Lessons We Learn from the People We Meet

Along the Way

The Crowd

John 12:12-19

Rev. Jenny McDevitt

April 2, 2023 | Palm Sunday

It is a careful balancing act, Palm Sunday. We have a joyous parade, with palm branches and hopeful, expectant shouts from the crowd. We have Jesus on a donkey, in control and ready to make things right again. Hosanna, indeed. It is a joyous parade, but we know where that parade is headed — to a last supper and last words, to another parade of sorts, where Jesus will carry a cross upon his shoulders (rather than let a donkey carry him) to a heartbreaking moment high on a hill.

The brilliant preacher Fred Craddock once said, “Every Palm Sunday, I find myself wishing I didn’t know everything that will follow.”¹ Every Palm Sunday, I find myself agreeing with him. Wouldn’t it be nice if we could just lose ourselves in this parade?

One of the most magical days of my childhood, every year, was Thanksgiving Day. In the interest of honesty, it wasn’t so much because of Thanksgiving itself, but because the day after Thanksgiving, the McDevitt household went all in on Christmas everything, and I loved it. The anticipation of that day of cookies and decorating and lights was maybe even better than the day itself. It all began with the Detroit Thanksgiving Day parade. I loved the giant balloons more than anything else, and my very favorite balloon was Dumbo. Dumbo was my everything as a small child, in part, I suspect, because I was too young to realize that most of story is devastating. In adulthood, I can’t make it through without tears. As a child, though, it was a flying elephant and that was amazing. And so when Dumbo came parading down Woodward Avenue on Thanksgiving Day, my world was perfect ... until the year when, unbeknownst to me ahead of time, Dumbo was retired. Throughout the entirety of the parade, I kept waiting and waiting, sure that elephant was going to fly through the sky at any moment. It didn’t happen. For the first time in my young life, the Detroit Thanksgiving Day Parade failed to live up to my expectations.

The Gospel of John’s account of Palm Sunday is different from the others. Matthew, Mark, and Luke spend quite a bit of time on the logistics of things — the disciples are sent to acquire a donkey, basically being told to take the first one they see and tell whoever owns it, “The Lord has need of it,” and presume that will somehow be explanation enough. There’s none of that in the story as John tells it. There is a donkey, but Jesus just rides in on it, with no fuss about where it came from. What we get in exchange, though, is far more detail about the crowd lining the streets.

The crowd, John tells us, was made up of people who had been there to see him call Lazarus up out of the tomb. Or if they hadn’t been there themselves, they’d heard the story from someone who had. They didn’t come to this parade casually. They came because it was their chance to see the man who could raise the dead. The man who could make the blind see. The man who could take someone’s after school snack and make it enough to feed thousands. The man who could take six jars of water and turn them into an unending supply of wine. They didn’t come just because they had nothing better to do. They came with excitement in

their voices and hope caught in their hearts to see what this man was going to do next. "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna!"

"It was because they had heard he had performed signs," John says. That was why the crowd went out to meet him. They couldn't *help* themselves. They couldn't help *themselves*. That's why they cried hosanna. "Hosanna — save us, now! Deliver us!" It is a cry of urgent need, a cry that becomes joyful only because as the crowd cries out, they believe their need is going to be met. He's done wild things before, the crowd remembers. Surely he will do it again.

There were actually two parades that day. Jesus' parade entered Jerusalem from the east, but on the opposite side of the city, Pontius Pilate entered Jerusalem from the west. We aren't told that in scripture, but historical sources from that time are clear. It was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year, and it was standard practice for Roman rulers to be in Jerusalem for major festivals — not because of their desire to worship, but because of their need to control. Especially this week. Because Passover celebrates the Jewish people's history of liberation from their oppressors in Egypt. Roman rulers certainly didn't want anyone to get the idea that liberation might be a present reality, not just an old story. And so to squash any chance of that happening, they marched in town with tremendous displays of power. The crowds had seen it a million times before. The crowds had seen it enough that it had come to be expected. Over time, it became just the way things were.

It stands to reason, then, that the crowds armed with palms and shouting Hosanna might have been looking for the man who performed all sorts of signs to stand up and claim the title they are trying to hand him: King of Israel. They might have been hoping, praying, pleading for him to come face to face with that other parade, and not just take it on, but take it down.

Can you blame them? Haven't we cried out, wanting the same?

I confess that on this Palm Sunday, the voices of the crowd crying out "hosanna" has a different ring to it. I cannot help but hear it in the voices of school children and administrators in the halls of the Covenant School in Nashville. Oh, I'm sure they weren't actually crying out. Children have now been trained far too well for far too long about what to do in an active shooter situation. I'm sure their voices didn't cry out, but of course their hearts did. "Hosanna. Save us, now! Save us, please."

The very worst article I read in the aftermath was not one that detailed exactly what happened. It was not one that detailed the extent of the injuries. It was not even one that offered accounts of the lives lost. It was an article in *The New York Times* that said, "The mass shooting in Nashville this week has generated a broad shrugging of shoulders in Washington."² The article made clear this was happening across party lines. The president's response was that he can do no more on his own. One of the first public comments from an elected representative in Tennessee was: "We're not going to fix it. We have gone as far as we're going with gun control."

Shrugging shoulders. It's just the way things are. In the meantime, the shouts of, "Hosanna! Save us!" were still ringing through the air.

The crowds wanted Jesus to save them, and save them now. Because of all they had seen and heard, they were expecting it. Frustratingly, Jesus has never been terribly concerned about what people expect of him. No one in the crowd that day expected him to go to the cross, and certainly not to go to the cross willingly. But that's what he would do.

By the way, the reason that Pilate and the other leaders are so upset with Jesus? It's not because Jesus brought Lazarus back to life, or because he was preaching with his words and his actions about letting the captives go free, or because he was healing all who were in need, or anything else that he was doing. The authorities, the Roman leaders, were upset because, as the last verse in today's reading says, "The world has gone after him." If Jesus had done all those same things without attracting any attention, without people crowding around to see him, without raising people's hope, without making people realize there might be a different way to live? If that had been the case, the authorities wouldn't have cared. It's because the world is going after him that the authorities will go after him, too, but they will do it with a crown of thorns and a cross, with condemnation and crucifixion.

Like Fred Craddock said, it would be easier to celebrate Palm Sunday if we didn't know where that parade was headed. And it would be easier to follow Jesus if we didn't know where we would be headed. Because right after that parade? Right after the authorities lament that the people are following Jesus? The next things Jesus says is, "Those who love their life lose it, and those hate their life in this world will keep it. Whoever serves me must follow me. Where I am, there will my servant be also."

Following Jesus is what we are called to do, but make no mistake. Joining that parade comes with a cost. Because that parade ends up at the cross.

Now, let me make sure I am not suggesting that you or I or anyone else ought to be crucified, literally or figuratively. There is one Jesus. One savior of the world. One who hangs upon the cross. One who dies for the sake of everyone else. And we are not it. By the grace of God, we are not it.

The call of the cross to us is, nevertheless, sacrifice. Jesus laid down his life in a way that would change the world. How do we lay down our lives in a way that will change the world? Will we have to sacrifice our place in society? Will we have to sacrifice some of our finances and maybe even our future plans? Will we have to sacrifice our certainty about what matters most and our commitment to what we've always known? Will we have to sacrifice some of our own rights in order to better protect others? Will we have to sacrifice our understanding of who our neighbor is, and our assumptions about what that means? Will we have to sacrifice some of our own sense of security, to ensure the security of others? Will we have to sacrifice some of our understanding of what it means to be Christian, in order to better follow Christ?

Every one of those things is a scary proposition. But the one who says, "Follow me" is also the one who says, "Do not be afraid."

This parade is not what the crowd expected that day. And it's not really what we expect (or at least not what we'd most like it to be) today, either, is it? All I know is that until we are willing to follow where it leads, until we are willing to follow Jesus where he leads, the crowds, the children, the vulnerable — all of them — they will keep crying out, "Hosanna! Save us! Hosanna! Save us, now!"

¹ From his sermon, "If Only We Didn't Know," included *The Collected Sermons of Fred Craddock*.

² "Shooting Prompts a Shrug in Washington," Annie Karni, *The New York Times*, March 29, 2023. Accessed online <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/29/us/politics/nashville-shooting-gop-action.html>