

Crowding Jesus

Matthew 21: 1-1; Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

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Prayer: May the seed of your Word find good soil in us, Great Sower and Life-Giver. Do not let your truth be choked out by competing reverie or swept away by a flood of indifference. We want to hear your word, and live it, today especially, to grow and to thrive where we are planted ...may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight....

March madness was cancelled. Olympics are cancelled. High School sports seasons are cancelled. School, in all of its iterations, is cancelled and we are launched into on-line learning opportunities and limitations. Many of us are working from home, learning new on-line technologies. Many of us also feel stuck at home, seeking to make good use of this time, and creatively adapt under COVID19 restrictions. Those who work in health care are facing unprecedented challenges and those who struggle for their health are deserving of compassion. This week several municipalities have asked people to stop congregating for pick-up basketball games or even hiking too close to one another. We are working hard not to crowd each other, social distancing at 6' apart. It doesn't come naturally.

There were more than 50 of us who attended Jesus Christ Superstar on Sunday afternoon March 1. The JP Webster library sponsored the event. My first day as your Interim Senior Pastor at First Church, and ... what a month it has been. That turned out to be, ironically, one of our last experiences in a crowd. Jesus Christ Superstar explores some of the themes around Jesus' life that we do not always know how to talk about...in a group. Although it is right there in the New Testament. One of Jesus' biggest problems, in the day to day living of his earthly life, was his relationship with crowds. His love for these people, and his frustrations with them.

His ministry began in crowd dynamics at a wedding, the potential disappointment of a crowd of people who had run out of wine — his mother understands what the servants have just figured out: they didn't have enough! He and his mother have words "Jesus, they've run out of wine..." "what is that to me... my time has not yet come." His mother knows her boy and says to the steward, "...okay...do whatever he tells you" and stands back giving space, while her boy turns the water into wine. The wedding crowd didn't even understand what had happened, but the servants were astonished.

Crowds followed Jesus around, he was a spectacle, they yearned for healing, they sought his teaching, they asked him for food. Although he is popular, wildly popular, so popular authorities

start to worry about his influence, he is not well understood. I've learned this is a problem with celebrity culture. (People are attracted to the star and the star wants to be understood as a human. Superstars have uneasy relationships with their own stardom.) The Roman authorities do not care to understand him (it's not their job to understand him, only to control their territory), and the crowds are interested in the spectacle — there is a lot to see and take in up close with Jesus. He withdraws from the crowds, at one point he jumps in a boat and is so exhausted, he sleeps while a storm rages around him and the disciples wake him up in fear. "Where is your faith?" he asks them.

He teaches the crowd in parables, this one he is in a boat a little out from the crowd, to get some distance on them: There was a sower... and the sower sows seeds — some fell on the path, birds found them and ate those seeds, some fell on rocky ground, where they could not take root, some fell in the thorns and weeds and were choked out. Other seeds fell on good soil.

Where did those seeds fall? You can tell the health of the plant by its yield. What kind of soil type are you in right now? What is your fruit? It's a question for the individuals in the crowd. Which soil type are they? There is one sower slinging seed as far as he can throw it. But where is it landing?

Generations have turned over this parable's soil, passed down these seeds from year to year, and the story maintains its relevance. Look at the soil, the conditions lying around, look at the yield at the harvest. Faith is a growing thing. But there are no guarantees — any farmer will tell you, growing things are influenced by conditions.

Scholars tell us that most likely there were at least two big processions entering Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30.¹ One from the east, largely composed of common people and children, following Jesus from Galilee — riding a humble donkey down the Mount of Olives. The donkey is not a war horse, it symbolizes peace. Messiah comes bringing peace this is prophesied in Isaiah. As the crowds went ahead of him and followed him into Jerusalem they were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" The palms are symbols of peace — they didn't order them from Florida — they are the native plants of the region. The children are out enjoying the day. Jesus enters the Holy City in peace.

From the west, approaches the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, entering the city on a war horse, at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. Pilate has come from Caesarea Maritima for the purpose of maintaining law and order during the likely tumultuous days of the Jewish festival of Passover.

Pilate's procession is not mentioned in the Bible, but it is likely that there was one; it was the Roman custom. We know that Pilate travelled to Jerusalem about the same time that Jesus did. We also know that a Roman governor travelled with his army, in a conspicuous display of Roman power as they journeyed, chariot horses were hitched, the men and the horses wore their armor, they made a display of power on purpose. If they were coming into your town you would grab your children, get the laundry off the line outside, close your windows and doors, roll up your rugs to prevent the dust coming in underneath the door, and through the cracks in the windows. And keep everyone close inside, sheltering in place, until the army had passed by. You would wait awhile for the clouds of dust from the horses and chariots to settle before you came out. Otherwise you'd never get your place clean again.

These two very different processions embody the central conflict of the week ahead in Jerusalem.

Two different soil types, if you will. Pilate has prepared the conditions for war, Jesus for peace. Pilate will reap violence, and preside over a bloody crucifixion. Although he tries to distance himself from the decision by publically washing his hands of it, history remembers him for nothing else. Jesus will reap a blessing for the world that continues to take root and grow and produce fruit even as he approaches a violent end. It is what he sowed in his lifetime.

Friends we are in an unprecedented time during this season of pandemic. The news is full of stories ranging from the heroic, to the tragic to the ridiculous. Some of us are enormously challenged to support our own health. As you enter Holy week this year, consider your conditions ...where you are able to plant and cultivate health and the things that matter. The pandemic has taken away so much of our normal lives — school, sports, a night out with friends, or a trip to the Bushnell. It's a time to re-think and innovate, to support, and to do the things that will bear fruit now and beyond this moment.

Faith, like health, is a growing thing. Like a mustard seed, like yeast in dough.
May faith take root and grow and flourish in you as we enter Holy Week this year.

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¹ *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus' Final Days in Jerusalem*, by John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg. As quoted in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, vol 2.*, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor eds.