



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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# Faces in the Crowd

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*A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" (Matthew 21:8-9).*

One way to read scripture, from a great devotional tradition, is to meditate on a passage, picturing the scene as if you were there, looking at all the people, imagining what they might be thinking, watching how each person responds to what's going on around them. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is a perfect story to read that way, so this morning I'll invite you to look around for yourself and tell me what you see among the faces in this Palm Sunday crowd.

First, a word about the geography. From the Mount of Olives, which is not so much a mountain as a conspicuously high hill, you make your way down a winding road to the west, into a narrow valley, then up and around another hill, where the walled city of Jerusalem sits on top of what people here call Mount Zion. The whole roundabout route is only a couple of miles or so, and all along the way Jerusalem looms large above you, like the crossroads of history and destiny, where the magnificent temple stands as the place many people think God is most likely to appear.

People show up today for all kinds of reasons. Some of them are jubilant. They're busy pulling branches down off the palm trees, rolling out a green carpet to welcome Jesus to the city, though they have lots of different ideas about who this Jesus really is.

Among the jubilant are young men with dreams of glory. They think Jesus has come to start an insurrection, and they're stoking themselves up to cast out the Romans—which is why some other men on the edge of the crowd are watching them closely, jotting down names so the police will know whom to round up if and when the trouble starts.

Others in the crowd are jubilant for more personal reasons. They don't care about politics or mass movements. A few of them have felt this man's touch, and now they can see in ways they never saw before. Some walk without crutches who could barely move before they met him, and some would tell you they owe their lives to this man on the donkey. Scattered among the crowd, and stretched out along the road, are others who want to see or walk or make the voices stop inside their heads. They've heard what the prophet from Nazareth can do, and they're here to catch a glimpse of him, hoping they can get close enough for his hands to be laid on their heads too.

Lots of people are here because they want something from Jesus, but others came mostly because it's the holidays. Some dearly want to be faithful to God, and for them this is the highlight of the year. They love the festival because it helps them feel closer to God, and they could hardly describe it any better than that if you asked them. Others are here just because it's what people do this time of year. The rest of their family was coming and it's good to be with them, though truth be told they could take or leave all this religious stuff. Whatever the reason, they're in town, and so they become part of the crowd when the man from Nazareth makes his way into the city.

A striking thing about this crowd is that there are lots of women here, and some of them are walking close by the man on the donkey. A few have been healed by him, but many more have simply connected in one way or another to Jesus. They've looked into his eyes, knowing that eyes are windows to the soul, and they've seen in this man's eyes a depth of insight and compassion, and a quiet kind of joy, though touched with sorrow, that makes him fascinating and almost irresistible. But more than that, he takes them seriously. He treats them with respect, and enjoys their company, though he doesn't seem to want anything from them except their friendship, and the hope that they themselves might thrive in the love of God.

And as always in a crowd like this, there are lots of children running around. They're excited to find a parade, so they pick up palms and wave them too. They want to do what the big people are doing.

Meanwhile, on the edge of the crowd, not waving any palms, are a handful of men who are not the least bit jubilant. They're sober, security-minded men who have only grown more hostile to Jesus as others have grown more devoted. They see this Galilean as a trouble maker, a rule breaker who won't submit to their authority and threatens to upset the arrangement they've worked out with the governor, to keep their power and privilege so long as law and order prevail. These men have a plan of their own, and they're working out the details even as they watch the crowd sweep their enemy into the trap they've so carefully laid out for him.

There are a multitude of faces in the crowd. Some have been healed and some are still hurting; some are hopeful while others are hostile. People are here for all sorts of reasons, with all kinds of expectations. And what about the man on the donkey? What do you see in his face? What do you suppose he's thinking?

No one can know for sure, of course. Human beings are complicated. We're mysteries even to ourselves, let alone to one another. How much more mysterious is this man, who forever seems to blur the boundary between humanity and divinity? Still, to meditate on the mind of Jesus, especially today, on Palm Sunday, is to imagine what love is, and so to contemplate something central to the heart of God.

I imagine Jesus sees those he's already healed and that makes him smile. He smiles because he's glad for them and he shares their joy, but also because the Great Physician delights in doing what he came to do. And he smiles even more deeply since he knows they've only begun to taste the joy that God has prepared for them.

Jesus sees many who are still hurting, and his heart goes out to them; that's just what compassion does. He remembers what he said some time ago on another hillside: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven; blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." And he knows it's true because he himself will make it true. But in the meantime, Jesus feels their suffering more than they can know—not least because this little donkey is carrying him even now toward as much pain as anyone can imagine.

Jesus looks around the crowd and his eyes fall upon those who are hopeful, though they hope for different things. The zealots' hope for revolution will be disappointed soon enough, and some of them will become bitter and be tempted to despair. There will be no insurrection against Rome this week, and the insurrection that will come forty years from now will end in disaster; even the massive stones of the temple will be brought down and scattered along with the zealots' hopes. But those who hope in something greater even now will not be disappointed. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled; blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."

Jesus's eyes fall upon those who are hostile too, standing on the edge of the crowd. They're so misguided, and yet so sure of themselves. That's the way it is with human beings: the least insightful are often the most confident, or at least they pretend to be. "A man's ways are right in his own eyes," the proverb says, "but God judges the heart." There are some here who will kill the Son of God precisely out of what they think is their own devotion to God.

And somewhere in the crowd there is a carpenter, who by the end of the week will be paid to nail a cross together, and set aside a few more nails for the hands and feet of the one to be crucified. What do you suppose Jesus thinks about this member of his own carpenters' guild?

Whenever God moves among humankind, ironies abound. Then what wondrous love is this, that nudges the little donkey on through the crowd, toward the city, into the long shadow of a cross? Only love will do that. Any other



attitude, knowing what lies ahead, would turn the donkey around and ride out of town.

But many in the crowd are shouting “Hosanna!” now, which means “Save us,” and that’s what Jesus has come to do. He’s come to bring salvation to anyone who will receive it—salvation from sin and suffering, from the tyranny of the self and the torments of the soul. He’s come to bring salvation even from death itself, though among the deep mysteries of God is that only one who has died and rises again can lead anyone else to life on the other side.

Jesus comes to save everyone in the crowd who is willing to be saved, especially those who feel despised and forsaken in this world. Even the donkey, whose very name is a label of scorn for human beings, gets caught up in the great drama of redemption. Centuries later, G. K. Chesterton will imagine the donkey remembering this day:

Fools! For I also had my hour;  
One far fierce hour and sweet:  
There was a shout about my ears,  
And palms before my feet.

So Jesus nudges the donkey on toward the holy city, toward Jerusalem old and new. He sees the faces in the crowd, and his eyes fall upon one person after another. Now he sees you too, standing at the edge of the crowd, palm in hand.

What do you see in his eyes as he looks at you? What do you want from him? And what do you suppose he sees in you? What does he want from you?



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