

## PASSION SUNDAY | MARCH 24, 2024

MARK 11:1-11

ISAIAH 50:4-9A | PSALM 31:9-16 | PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11 | MARK 15:1-39

Over the course of this week, many churches will hear the Passion story in the form of a play. Some of these will be acted out dramatically with fancy costumes and elaborate sets. Others will be more austere and look more like table reads. While the details may differ from church to church, each play will have the same cast. Someone will play Jesus, someone Pilate, someone Peter, so on and so forth. There's even a part for people who show up unprepared: "Crowd."

This can make "crowd" seem like a bit of an afterthought. But in truth, it's one of the most integral players in the story. Not only does the crowd drive the narrative, but it serves as an important contrast to Mark's Jesus and helps clarify the theological point Mark is trying to make.

About twenty years ago, business journalist James Surowiecki landed on the bestseller list for a book titled *The Wisdom of Crowds*. The book showed how "groups are remarkably intelligent, and are often smarter than the smartest people in them." For example, if you were a contestant on the game show *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*, you might think that the best lifeline to use is phoning your smartest friend would. In fact, polling the audience of strangers gets you the right answer far more often. The crowd often knows more than the individual.

And yet, the crowd in the Passion narrative is not a font of wisdom or reason. Quite the opposite. One day, they are welcoming Jesus into Jerusalem with acclaim. Just a few days later, they are shouting to have him crucified. So what happened?

Well, the wise crowds that Surowiecki was talking about were mostly acting independently. Voting anonymously or taking private surveys. But that's not how the crowds in Mark's gospel work. Since the very beginning of Mark's gospel, we've been hearing of growing crowds around Jesus. These are people who are acting and making decisions surrounded by their family, friends, and neighbors. And so they are responding to social pressures and expectations. They want to see what everyone else thinks first. They go along to get along. They figure the result is a foregone conclusion. They are striving to be accepted by others.

In other words, the vision that Mark gives us here is not of a crowd of good people showing up on Palm Sunday and then a different crowd of bad people showing up on Good Friday. It's a crowd of people who are capable of acting in many different ways depending on what's happening around them. People who are often speaking, explaining, and justifying their actions to others. People who are consciously or unconsciously trying to maintain their place, their relationships, and their status among other people.

Consider Peter, for example. Throughout Mark's gospel, Peter is an enthusiastic but occasionally misguided follower of Jesus. One who says that under no circumstances will he deny being a follower of Jesus. Until Jesus is handed over to be crucified. Then he denies knowing Jesus at all. What happened? Well, circumstances changed. It was easier to boast about your commitment to Jesus when it was just you and Jesus and Jesus's other disciples. But when you're surrounded by

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strangers in Pilate's courtyard, the calculus changes. Is Peter a good disciple? *Maybe*. Mark says. *But maybe not*.

This contingency is one of the disconcerting themes in Mark's Passion narrative. We all have ideas about ourselves and our character and our principles. When I read about historical injustices, I assure myself that I would have done the right thing if I had been alive. Or when I see some terrible incident on the news, I reassure myself that I would have done the right thing if I'd been there. *Maybe*, Mark says. *But maybe not*.

Even the crowd itself is a character in flux. Up to this point in his gospel, the crowds have been growing in size. In one story, these crowds were so large that people had to be lowered through the roof of a house because the door was mobbed with people. In another story, Jesus had to sneak out in the early morning just to get some time to himself.

But now the crowds start to diminish. His disciples abandon him. Peter denies him. The crowd moves on to other things. Even the criminals on his sides deride him. And immediately before his death, Mark tells us, "At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus understands himself to be forsaken not only by friends and disciples and neighbors but by God.

And unlike the crowds, who are full of people explaining their choices and justifying their about-faces, Jesus is remarkably silent through all this. There are no appeals to his disciples asking them to stay. No long speech to Pilate explaining his kingship. No explanation of his ministry to the criminals at his side. Even the high priest asks, "Have you no answer [to these charges]?" Unlike the rest of the characters in the story, Jesus is not seeking approval or pity or even understanding.

That's because Jesus is seeking first the kingdom of God, just as he has throughout his entire ministry. And the fullness of God's mercy and love is not something that can be earned from others. It can only be received from God. Jesus's entire ministry has been animated by the conviction that the kingdom of God, God's restoring and renewal of creation, is not in some far-off future. But it is at hand whenever people trust in God's liberating love.

And so even when Jesus is bound and captive, he remains the one character in the Passion narrative who is truly free. Free of the need to have our ego at the center of it all. Free of the indifference that we feel toward those who differ from us. Free of the striving that we believe will earn us salvation. Free of the need to protect himself at all costs. Even when, by outward appearances, his ministry seems to be heading toward failure, Jesus still seeks and proclaims the kingdom of God. Is this crucified man worthy of our trust? *Yes*, Mark tells us. *Always*.

"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus," St. Paul encourages us. A mind that values generosity over self-preservation, peace over violence, and mercy over retribution. In short, a mind which is filled not with the hubris of the crowd but enlightened by the wisdom of the cross.

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