

SERMON: Praising, Cursing, or Silent?

TEXT: Luke 19:28-40

My son, Lucas, was sixteen years old in the summer of 2010, when he and I went with a group from our presbytery to the Presbyterian Youth Triennium on the campus of Purdue University. Nearly 6,000 teenagers attend this week-long event, named Triennium because it takes place every three years. Why only every three years? Well, I'm pretty sure it takes that long for all the adults involved – even the ones in youth ministry – to recover!

Anyway, the campus at Purdue is massive, and you walk several miles every day going back and forth from the dorm to the cafeteria to the worship auditorium to the classroom. Obviously, the organizers try to keep the group contained as much as possible, but there are miles to cover no matter what.

Well, I was the only person Lucas knew in our group when the week began. He is extremely introverted, so it takes a great deal of energy and courage for him to speak to anyone. And when we had to separate to find our different classroom assignments (which were miles apart, of course), he was terrified that he would get lost. I honestly wasn't looking forward to it myself, but we studied the campus map together and tried to look for landmarks. Then I reminded him to look for the

people in the yellow shirts; it was their job to help give directions. Finally, I told him, if all else fails, just follow the crowd. It's likely that they will eventually lead you to a familiar place.

Of course, it just occurred to me that this may not have been the best advice. Because following the crowd is really just a milder term for something called mob mentality. And whenever I think of what happened on Palm Sunday and the days that followed, I think of mob mentality.

Mob mentality – also known as herd mentality – is a psychological phenomenon in which people can inadvertently take on the behaviors and sentiments of those around them. An article I read said, “Humans have a predilection to imitate one another’s behavior. We end up professing beliefs and acting out in ways which we would have never otherwise done or considered independently.” We’ve seen or experienced how crowds at large sporting events can get worked up into a frenzy either with exuberant cheering and storming the field or with destructive or violent behaviors. Of course, when you add excessive alcohol consumption, it only makes matters worse.

This article also pointed out, “one of the most enduring examples of mob mentality is that of *The Salem Witch Trials* [of 1692], wherein an entire population [in Salem, Massachusetts] came to believe that completely innocent victims were witches possessed by the devil. They arrived at this conclusion without any physical or rational evidence. There was simply a snowball effect once one person claimed to see the devil, claimed a conspiracy of witches, and then accused another woman of being a witch. Widespread panic ensued. Women were lynched one right after the other without a fair or reasonable trial because, by that point, those making the determination were incapable of fair reasoning. They had already been entirely swayed by mob mentality.” (Kristen Polito *What is “Mob Mentality?”*

www.inpathybulletin.com, March 8, 2017)

Of course, while centuries of psychological research may offer a good explanation for the events of Palm Sunday and Holy Week and how quickly the crowd turned from praising Jesus to cursing him, **it is not an excuse.**

If you have given up something for Lent, tried to adhere to certain restrictions on your diet, or if you have taken on another discipline to give you greater spiritual focus, you have learned that any change in habit takes great

intentionality and focus. It's too easy to forget and slip back into our old ways when we're busy and distracted by other things.

We live in a time with so much talk, so much noise, so much shouting and yelling and cursing and protesting. Much of the time I think we don't even know what we're saying. And we certainly don't listen to what anyone else is saying.

The crowds that were praising Jesus that day when he entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey were cheering with hope. Hailing him as a king and a savior. Awaiting his victory over the enemy – Caesar and the Roman government. Expecting him to liberate them from injustice and oppression. They were like the crowd in a stadium when the home team enters the field: praising in celebration of a winning season; cheering in anticipation of a strong victory.

One Biblical scholar wrote: “As Jesus enters, a *whole multitude of the disciples*, throng around, spread their cloaks on the road, and lift loud their praise: *Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord....* Then a couplet of praise is added: *Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven.* This is more than a song of heavenly rest and hope in the world to come. It is about the *kingdom of the heavens....*, which has drawn near in Jesus to challenge and change the kingdoms of

this world. This *multitude* [of followers] echoes the song of the *multitude of the heavenly host* in Luke's birth narrative: *Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace.* (2:13-14) (H. Stephen Shoemaker, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 2)

In their PRAISING is a cry for victory, but also a cry for justice and peace. Their exuberance overwhelms a group of Pharisees, who say to Jesus, "Order your disciples to stop." This same scholar wonders, "Are they embarrassed by the wild, ecstatic praise? Are they trying to warn Jesus of the danger of such a demonstration? Earlier in Luke, some Pharisees warn Jesus about Herod's murderous intent: *Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you* (13:31). Were they afraid that the Roman authorities would smell insurrection and come with terrible vengeance against the nation? Probably." (H. Stephen Shoemaker, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 2)

Luke is the only one of the gospels that records this answer from Jesus: "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

I have always loved this phrase. *If these were silent, the stones would shout out.* The poetry of it. The image of cold, lifeless stones coming to life and using their voices to praise the Lord. The glory of all creation, whose praise of their

Creator rises from the depths of their being. The stones, the soil, the sand. Sun, moon, and stars. The oceans, rivers, and lakes. Trees, shrubs, flowers. The birds of the air, the fish of the sea, all creatures great and small. In their majesty, all witness unceasingly to their glorious Creator, undeterred and never to be silenced.

The scholar I've been quoting points out several layers of meaning in the phrase, *the stones would shout out*. "First, here is a truth too good to have its mouth shut. It may be temporarily silenced, but not for long. Second, if disciples fall away by cowardice or complacency, God will raise up more! As John the Baptist said in his message by the Jordan: *God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham* (Luke 3:8).... Third, here is an echo of the prophetic warning of Habakkuk 2:9-11. Injustice will not long prevail. The very stones of the house built on corruption *will cry out from the wall.*" (H. Stephen Shoemaker, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2)

The praise of that Palm Sunday crowd does go silent, however. The praise goes silent, when later in the week, Jesus, through blood, sweat, and tears, will ask his disciples to pray with him in the garden, and they fall asleep. The praise goes silent, when Judas betrays him, not with words, but a more painful kiss. The praise

goes silent, when Jesus is arrested and brought to trial in the middle of the night, and the disciples scatter in fear.

And then the silence turns to cursing, as Peter denies his relationship with Jesus three times, each time growing more adamant and angry. The silence turns to cursing, as the once faithful mob turns against him in his own silence, shouting “Crucify him!”

Our faith – and our faithfulness to Jesus – calls for intentionality, calls for a singular focus, calls us to be undeterred in our following and in our praise of him. May we never get caught up in the crowd that is cursing. May we never be frightened into silence and inaction. May we always remain faithful, praising our Lord and Savior all the way to the cross...

To the glory of God!

AMEN.