

“A Crowd of People... Like Us”

Doug Long, April 5, 2020

John the Baptist in a no-where Bar... waiting on Jesus.

Randall Bramblett references the poet Alan Ginsberg in the song... Ginsberg's epic poem entitled 'Howl' from almost 65 years ago contains the term 'angel-headed hipsters'... and refers to all manner of counter-cultural 'howls' from the marginalized and societal misfits.

...and here I was thinking that 'hipsters' was a new term.

I hear John the Baptist waiting on Jesus and I think of another work from more than 65 years ago... Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot."
Waiting for Godot... for God... for Jesus.

Yes, Randall... we have not changed that much changed-
We still need shelter from the grindin' storm
We still need love to keep us warm

And like John, we're waitin' on Jesus. It was true of the Palm Sunday crowd, too. "A Crowd of People... Like Us."

There's an old story about a country minister with no formal education that was an EXCELLENT preacher. When asked his secret he said, "Well first, I tell them what I'm gonna say... and then I say it... and then I tell them what I said."

Pretty simple. I'm going to simplify it a little more. Let me tell you what I'm going to say. I'm going to spend most of my time setting the stage for the scripture reading. Then I'm going to read it. And then I'm going to be about done.

There is so much going on in the Palm Sunday event, Jesus entering Jerusalem at the beginning of what we refer to as Holy Week. I want to point out portions of it this morning and try to make fleeting connections to our own lives... and assuming that many of you have a bit more time to reflect on the passage, I'll also recommend you spend some time this week doing just that. Pick up a Bible, or look one up online, and reflect on what you read. It is anything but boring (...and you may want to join Anthony's Zoom tomorrow evening in the study of aspects of this Holy Week from Matthew's perspective. This morning I'm focusing on aspects in John's telling.)

We've spoken in past years about two processions coming into Jerusalem at the beginning of the Passover. There is, on the one hand, the procession of Jesus, of course, and what is termed as the Triumphant Entry... the palm procession we celebrate each year... Jesus entrance proclaiming the peace of heaven to all... pax Christi... the peace of Christ
...but Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan also make the convincing case that Roman legions would have entered from a different gate of the city, a much larger procession with armies of 'real-world' peace-keepers ... Pax Romana... peace via military might.
We must, therefore, read and consider all of the Holy Week narrative and events beneath the ominous umbrella of the occupying troops of Rome.

This tension between the way of Jesus and the way of Rome is fleshed out dramatically in the John's Gospel. While Jesus seems almost oblivious to the foreign occupation, the Pharisees and High Priests are squarely focused on **not** riling up the Romans.

From the first chapters, a growing battle for public opinion between Jesus and the Pharisees is chronicled. It culminates in the 11th chapter when the Pharisees hold a special meeting of their Council specifically about... what to do with Jesus.

"If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." The verdict of that Council is succinctly stated in verse 53: "So from that day on they planned to put him to death."

In the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) the last thing Jesus does before entering Jerusalem is heal a blind man.. or a pair of blind men... but in John the Passion Week is introduced with a dramatic flair all its own.

This occurs the night prior to the triumphant procession. The night prior to the entry, Jesus is at table with his good friends, Mary, Martha and their brother Lazarus.

And the dinner almost reads as a cast of characters who will carry out the rest of the script.

Even here, I must back up a bit and summarize the chapter that precedes it.

Because I do not expect you to be able to tease out one Gospel from another (most of us always mix the stories we hear all together without trying to sort out the individual Gospel accounts)... I want to quickly summarize what happens in John's telling, and only in John, prior to the night before the entry into Jerusalem.

This story is well known to most all of us.. but again, placing it in context makes all the difference. [As an aside, it's also where the most famous short verse in the Bible occurs... "Jesus wept."]

In chapter 11 of John, Lazarus dies... Lazarus, brother of Mary and Martha, all dear friends of Jesus. I hesitate to gloss over the chapter because there is so much fascinating dialogue and intrigue (I'll let you ponder that on your own this week)... but Lazarus dies and upon being summoned, Jesus deliberately waits until Lazarus has been dead for a few days.

When he decides to head to Bethany the disciples clearly warn him: "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?"

And Jesus says (I'll paraphrase), "Yep. I'm gonna go raise Lazarus from the dead."

When they arrived, many were already there to mourn Lazarus and console Martha and Mary. It's a long chapter but, to cut to the chase, Jesus tearfully approaches the tomb of Lazarus and, four days into being dead... calls him out. When the 'mummified' Lazarus emerges Jesus commands the followers... "Unbind him, and let him go."

Unwrap his body, swathed in gauze and sheets and the dress of death... "Unbind him, and let him go free."

Quite a scene, don't you think?

...And THAT'S when the High Priests met and said... We gotta get this Jesus movement under control. "If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation."

Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said "It's better to have one man die than to have the whole nation destroyed."

So from that day on they planned to put him to death.

Upon which, Jesus, wisely, retreated to the wilderness while the crowds speculated whether he would show up in Jerusalem at Passover, just a few days hence.

Here's the way John's 11th chapter ends: (John 11: 54- 57)

Jesus therefore no longer walked about openly among the Jews, but went from there to a town called Ephraim in the region near the wilderness; and he remained there with the disciples.

Now the Passover of the Jews was near, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves.

They were looking for Jesus and were asking one another as they stood in the temple, "What do you think? Surely he will not come to the festival, will he?"

Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who knew where Jesus was should let them know, so that they might arrest him.

At the close of chapter 11, Jesus and his disciples are now some 14 miles away from Jerusalem in a remote area. The Jewish religious leaders are on the lookout, should he emerge.

The passage that is printed for you in the bulletin is how the 12th chapter begins. Let me read it for you now, with just a bit of commentary:

Six days before the Passover [the Passover, you remember, is the Jewish celebration of deliverance, deliverance out of bondage/slavery in Egypt and on to the promised land. Ut's hen the angel o death, the final plague upon the Egyptians, passed over the homes of the Hebrew people and spared their first-born sons. The passive celebration drew the Jewish people from all over the known world to celebrate God's deliverance from the powers of submission. It is no understatement to expect the Roman military to exhibit a full and forceful presence during this time. The message being, celebrate your deliverance in the past all you want, but remember to whom you answer now. Imagine how the Romans would have viewed Jesus' message" Now is the time of your deliverance.] **Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany** [Bethany was about 2 miles from Jerusalem, on the slope of the Mount of Olives], **the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served** [Martha always served. She was the practical sister. The worker behind the scenes. The only who made sure the guests were fed. The world could not survive without the Marthas.] **and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.** [Think about that phrase for a moment. Lazarus had been buried, essentially, dead for four days just a week or so before. He was sitting at the table with them... which is to say that he was as alive as anyone. Do you think that went unnoticed? Imagine, if you can stretch it this far, that a well-loved personality dies of the Coronavirus. Let's say, Jimmy Carter dies ...is dead for a week or so... and then a little known Dr. comes along with a purported miracle cure, injects into the Carter corpse and suddenly President Carter is

alive again... and not just alive, fully recovered. Can you imagine the clamoring for that Dr.'s attention? Why, if she can cure someone who has already succumbed... she can protect me and my loved one's too.

I don't think it's a stretch to imagine that such a person would produce a frenzy. Back to the text...]

Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

[If Martha was the practical sister, Mary was the dreamer, the spirit-focused giver. In some traditions, even the lover of Jesus. In this act specifically, it cannot be ignored that she was also the preparer, she anoints Jesus' body with the traditional perfumes and oils of preparation of a body after death. It was an extravagant, solemn, intimate act ... and it caught everyone off guard.]

But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples [one of his disciples, implying that others were there as well] **(the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.)** [Poor Judas, even if he did make a legitimate point, "the money could be better used," he forever is remembered through history as the one who betrayed. It is comforting to always point the finger at another. It absolves us of any culpability or betrayal ourselves.]

Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." [Is that not also the lesson of our current isolation and quarantine from one another? We have life now? How shall we live this present moment?]

When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. [Again, this point cannot be underscored too boldly.]

So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus. [Cover up the evidence. Rewrite history. It happens in our day as well.]

The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem.

...and so the palm waving begins.

We think of the crowd gathered on the Palm procession as an amorphous unity of praise and exultation. I hope you'll take the time this week to consider them as individuals as well... and your place among them.

There was a cast of characters then. We are the cast now. We're all here today... we're all shouting... we're all on the journey together.

Mary, Martha, Lazarus, Jesus, Judas, the other disciples, the poor, the great crowd of Jews, the chief priests, the whole Passover tradition, under the umbrella of the Empire
All under the arch-umbrella of God.

That's next Sunday.

Amen.