

# WORSHIP

Sermon | 4.5.2020



## Power

**The Reverend Pen Peery**

Matthew 27:15-23

Now at the festival the governor [Pontus Pilate] was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, 'Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?' For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. While he was sitting on the judgement seat, his wife sent word to him, 'Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.' Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. The governor again said to them, 'Which of the two do you want me to release for you?' And they said, 'Barabbas.' Pilate said to them, 'Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?' All of them said, 'Let him be crucified!' Then he asked, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Let him be crucified!'

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Our second reading this morning takes place in the place – Jerusalem – where the crowds had been waving their palms to welcome Jesus like a hero. I am picking up the scene in the 27th chapter of Matthew after Jesus has been tried by Pontus Pilate and just before his crucifixion. Listen with me for the word of God.



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I've stopped being surprised by the behavior of the crowd.

Maybe that makes me a cynic.

Or maybe it's a sign that I am getting older.

I can think of numerous occasions – many during my lifetime – when crowds of people were coming together to celebrate, or advocate, or rally around some pretty terrible things.

The image of a crowd of young, white men carrying torches and marching in Charlottesville, Virginia will forever be etched in my mind.

As will images of Hutus and Tutsies during the time of genocide in Rwanda.

And middle-aged moms and dads screaming and crowded around a little African-American girl named Ruby Bridges who was trying to walk to school in New Orleans.

I have images of political rallies in my head where the focus isn't on what the candidate stands for – but instead how to whip up a crowd of people into a frenzy over who is to blame for what ails us. That's a bi-partisan comment, by the way.

I wish my expectations of the crowd were informed by different things. Like the crowd around the national mall during Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech. Or around President Bush in the heart of Manhattan, standing on the rubble of the Twin Towers after September 11.

But that type of crowd seems few and far between.

Frankly, I'm not even too surprised that in this strange moment we find ourselves living in – with a pandemic that threatens our health and an economic crisis that threatens our well-being – I'm not surprised that the cultural and political fault lines are beginning to show...that we are breaking into opposing crowds.

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After Jesus rode triumphantly into Jerusalem it only took six days for the crowds to turn. That's just how crowds are. Crowds are made up of people – and people are easily influenced on their own. It's even easier if they are in groups.

We don't really know how it happened. To go from waving palm branches to pointing to the cross in less than a week is a pretty dramatic turnaround to be sure – but all it takes is persuasion...and an appeal to self-interest...and stirring up some fear.

What's instructive to me about this terrible story of the crowds begging Pontus Pilate to release Barabbas and crucify Jesus isn't that the crowd could do something so cruel...so wrong...so awful. What's instructive is to remember that these were the same people who shouted Hosannah...Hosannah... "Save us!"

Those crowds that desensitized me to expect more from people?

I could have been in them.

If I lived in New Orleans as a middle-aged, white dad in 1960?

If I grew up in a home that spewed white nationalism in 2017?

If I were a member of an ethnic group that was taught to hate another in 1995 in Rwanda?

It could have been me.

Or you.

I'd like to think if I saw Jesus of Nazareth riding through the gates of Jerusalem from the Mount Olives I would have recognized his divinity. That I would have seen his holiness. His faithfulness. And that that experience would have forever changed me.

But I doubt I would have been more different than the other people who stood in the Governor's courtyard just feet from that same gate six days later.

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I wonder if Jesus was surprised by the crowds?

We don't know, of course.

The gospels paint a pretty stoic picture of Jesus throughout the last week of his life.

But I wonder what was going on inside?

When the drumbeat of crucifixion grew louder and louder.

And he saw the same faces in that courtyard who had lined the streets.

Maybe recognized the same voices.

His disciples – his followers – nowhere to be seen.

Was Jesus angry?

Disappointed?

Grieved?

Jesus was human, after all.

With the capacity to feel.

And to take the words and the actions of the crowd personally.

Yet, Jesus also had the amazing capacity to love.

That's a human and a divine trait.

It's also a choice.

That is why – even as evil and ugly as that crowd was standing in the Governor's courtyard yelling "crucify!" – this story isn't about the crowd.

And it's not about the religious authorities who were riling those crowds up.

And it's not about the military might that gave Pontus Pilate the authority to sit on "the judgment seat" at Jesus' trial.



And it's not about the cross-shaped instrument of torture used to keep people in their place.

No – this is a story about the particular kind of power that God chose – that Jesus chose – in the face of suffering and brokenness and in a time that seemed, at least, without much hope.

Power through weakness.

75 years ago, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: “God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. Matthew makes it quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering.”

How do we know that we are loved?

How do we know that – in spite of the ways we disappoint, and fall short – that we are saved?

How do we know – in a world where things feel so unstable and unsafe – that God will be with us?

We remember that when he had the choice –

Jesus turned toward the cross –

that he channeled his power into weakness –

because he knew, finally, that love would overcome and overwhelm.

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In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

