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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

March 24, 2024

Palm Sunday, Year C, Revised Common Lectionary

[Mark 11:1-11](#) (at the Liturgy of the Palms)

[Isaiah 50:4-9a](#)

[Psalm 31:9-16](#)

[Philippians 2:5-11](#)

[Mark 14:1-15:47](#)

or [Mark 15:1-39, \[40-47\]](#)

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It's been called collective effervescence: that feeling that happens in a crowd when everyone is somehow united into a greater whole. It's a spark, a charge of excitement, a sense of transcendence. I hope you've felt it sometimes: at a festival, a concert, maybe even at church. Maybe you felt a bit of it today in our procession. Later this spring the Episcopal Churches of Northern California will be gathering together for a revival where we will seek some of that joy that comes from being together in large numbers, singing and praying as one. But the church is an amateur when it comes to real big gatherings. Taylor Swift and Beyoncé make careers out of collective effervescence.

You can find collective effervescence anywhere on the political spectrum. At a Black Lives Matter rally or at the US Capitol on January 6, 2020. And crowds are a powerful force when it comes to politics. And they have an intuition and a collective will of their own that leaders often seek to influence and yet may not be able to fully control. It's been pointed out that at about the same time Jesus was riding into Jerusalem on a colt from the east, Pontius Pilate was riding into Jerusalem on a chariot from the west, coming up for the Passover festival from his seaside capital at Caesarea. Pilate would have tried to make an impression, soldiers marching in armor, standards carried high. But what made the greater impression that day was a little demonstration by a prophet and his followers coming down from rural Galilee. A Messiah figure who sparked the imagination of the crowd so that they spread their clothes and branches before him and cried out "Hosanna," which is a shout of praise that also means something like "Save us!", a shout you would offer to someone you think of as a liberator. And of course they were right.

And yet later that week another crowd in Jerusalem, one perhaps even with some of the very same people in it, would gather outside Pilate's palace with other words in their mouths, words our script placed in our own mouths a few minutes ago, inviting us to imagine ourselves as members of that same crowd: "Crucify him." Collective effervescence can impel us to love or to hate. It can give us a deep sense of oneness with others, especially those others who are sharing the experience with us. And it can also impel us to scapegoat others, especially those who are outside the group. It can create outcasts.

This week I saw a music video of an Israeli song that named the pain and agony of the victims of October 7 and went on to advocate “erasing” Gaza and turning it into an amusement park. It was a catchy song. It drew on patriotism and shared pain and also shared optimism and a sense of strength and can-do spirit. It could have been a Ukrainian or a Russian song, or an Arabic song, or a Burmese song, or a Sudanese song. It could have been an American song after 9/11. The violence in our hearts is usually cloaked in righteous motives. We want to protect the vulnerable, or punish a gross misdeed, or make the world safer, and with those genuine motivations we allow ourselves to treat someone as less than human.

This week we come very close to God and God comes very close to us, not just in our joy and our good fellowship feelings and our sense of transcendence and sacredness, not just in nature and sunsets or the smile of a child. This week God comes close also to our rage and our fear and our vulnerability, our longing to belong and our longing for vengeance, to the maze of motivations that are human limitation and human sin and human enmeshment in forces bigger than we are and that all lead us to harm ourselves and harm one another and harm God’s creation. God is no stranger to sin and suffering. God came into the heart of it, with us, for us. Today as Holy Week happens in the church year it happens also around the world in every place of violence or danger, every place of pain or exclusion, every place of tragedy, every place of tears. This week we come close to the tears of God. And as we enter more deeply into this week we are entering into the heart of God, a heart where all belong and there are no others; no outcasts; but all are invited for healing; all; all.