

“When the Cheering Stops”
Sermon Series on The Cross #6

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(Mark 15:1-11)

One Palm Sunday there was a 5-year-old boy named Sam who had a sore throat and had to stay home from church. His dad volunteered to stay with him while Sam’s mother and his two siblings went on without them. When the family returned home, little Sam noticed they were all carrying palm branches, and he asked what they were and what happened at church.

His mother replied, “Well, today is Palm Sunday, and when Jesus walked by, everyone waved palm branches over Him and shouted, ‘Hosannah! Praise the Lord!’” Little Sam thought about that for a little while, and then he said, “Great. The one Sunday I don’t go to church, Jesus showed up!”

Today we celebrate Palm Sunday, the day Jesus showed up and made His triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The week began on a high note. However, by the end of it, everything changed. The crowd that hailed Jesus as the Messiah and welcomed His arrival on Sunday changed their tune, and on Friday they called for His crucifixion.

What happened? Why did the cheering stop, and why did Jesus have to die? This morning we’ll try to answer that question.

When the Cheering Stopped

Anyone who has ever played or coached a sport at a competitive level, or worked in the executive suite of a business, or played an instrument with a symphony can tell you how fickle people can be sometimes. One minute they’re cheering your success, and the next they are calling for your head. Coaches who won national championships have been fired a few years later when they didn’t win enough games. Titans of business have gotten the boot when the earnings of the company took a turn. And aging actresses find that their phone doesn’t ring anymore, and they don’t get the film offers they once did.

What do you do when the cheering stops? How do you cope when people’s opinion turns against you? Jesus faced this very dilemma Himself during holy week 2,000 years ago. The crowd that hailed his Triumphal Entry on a Sunday was calling for His execution just five days later. It turned out Jesus wasn’t the Messiah they were hoping for, and they allowed their religious leaders to change their minds to such an extent that they wanted Jesus dead.

Dr. Paul Hickey was a lecturer who traveled across this country giving a popular address entitled "Marching Without the Band," and he told of people who have been heroic in history in the face of indifference and even hostility. He said it’s so much easier to keep going when the band is playing and the crowd is cheering, but it is much more difficult to be steadfast when there is no one to see and no one to cheer.

Dr. Hickey's thoughts come to mind today in thinking of Jesus who marched *with* the band on Palm Sunday but had to march *without* it the next Friday when He was taken to the cross by

Himself to be crucified. Jesus was hailed as a hero at the start of the week, but He was put to death as a criminal at the end of it. But it was at the end of the week, not the beginning, that Jesus' most important work was done. It was on the Cross, not in the parade, that Christ saved us.

Why Did the Cheering Stop?

In his book *Who Is This Man?* John Ortberg says¹ that we often think of Palm Sunday as an innocent children's parade, but it wasn't. It was profoundly political, and there is a great deal of symbolism which took place that day. The Bible tells us that the crowds welcomed Jesus with palms, cheers, and cloaks laid on the ground. Passover was a season of religious fervor and national identity, and that day it would have been natural for them to have in mind another Jewish hero from 170 years before.

Simon Maccabeus was a Jewish leader who along with his brothers led a full-scale revolt against the brutal reign of the Greek king Antiochus Epiphanes in 167 BC. Maccabeus – which means “the hammer” – was a hero who helped restore Judean independence for 80 years. When it happened back then, according to the Book of Maccabees the Jews celebrated in Jerusalem “with praise and palm branches, and with harps and cymbals and stringed instruments, and with hymns and songs, because a great enemy had been crushed and removed from Israel” (1 Maccabees 13:51, in the Apocrypha). This is also what the celebration of Hanukkah is all about today with the lighting of a menorah.

In Jesus' day, palms had become a symbol of Jewish nationalism, and they were a political statement. Knowing the story of the Maccabees helps us understand the thinking of those who waved palm branches to welcome Jesus. They were hoping that He was coming to crush and remove another great enemy of Israel. This time it was Rome.

The people shouted Hosanna – a call for salvation – and blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Jesus had been teaching about His kingdom in the days leading up to Passover, and it was a risky thing to do because of the Roman occupation. To call Jesus “king” or to teach about a kingdom here on earth was provocative. Caesar, Pilate, and Herod – they were the rulers, and any talk of a rival kingdom or another king would only provoke a confrontation.

In the Triumphal Entry Jesus engaged in some symbolism of his own, and He entered by the Eastern gate. Today it is now sealed, but in Jesus' day the Eastern gate was the direct route into Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. And it was through this gate that the promised Messiah was expected to come. Jesus rode through that gate – something a king or general would do. However, in an ironic twist He rode a donkey, a gentle animal of peace, rather than on a large horse, a powerful beast of war. Jesus came into Jerusalem as the Prince of Peace foretold by the prophet Zechariah, not as the conquering hero for whom the people were looking.

John Ortberg writes that there were three main ways the Jews of Jesus' day responded to the rule of the Roman Empire. There were the zealots, the Essenes, and the Sadducees. The Zealots wanted to use violence to overthrow the Romans, and they were the freedom fighters of their day. One of Jesus' own disciples was a zealot – Simon.

The second group was the Essenes, and we know about them from the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Essenes wanted to withdraw because they believed everything in the world had become

corrupt – not just in Rome but also the rest of Israel and the whole Temple system itself. They thought that the best response was to completely withdraw, and they became a desert community which devoted itself to a life of purity that included taking ritual baths several times a day.

The final group was the Sadducees; they wanted to assimilate. They were pragmatic people, and they thought that the best way to maintain order, as well as their influence, was to collaborate with the people in power. Their theology was a little sketchy, and they didn't believe in angels or the resurrection. They were only interested in the here and now. So they looked at Rome and figured "If you can't beat them, join them," and they cooperated with the Romans in the collection of taxes.

Three options: revolt, withdraw, or assimilate. Jesus created a problem for each group of people, and He rejected all three approaches. For example, Jesus healed a Roman soldier's servant, and He praised the Roman's faith. He said, *"Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith" (Mt. 8:10).*

In addition, in one of His sermons Jesus said, *"If anyone forces you to go with them one mile, go with them two."* This is a direct reference to a law that was hated by the Jews which allowed Roman soldiers to force civilians to carry their pack for a mile. It's what allowed the soldiers to compel Simon of Cyrene to carry the cross of Jesus to the place of execution when Christ stumbled under the weight of it. In essence, Jesus was saying, "Zealots, you're wrong. The kingdom of God will not come through violence." This didn't go down well with the Zealots.

But they weren't the only group Jesus offended. The Essenes were upset with Jesus because He seemed to ignore the Jewish purity regulations by touching lepers, eating with prostitutes, and associating with Gentiles. This challenged the Essene way of life, and it also infuriated the Pharisees. In essence, Jesus was saying, "Essenes, you're wrong. The kingdom of God will not be realized through withdrawing into a religious subculture."

And Jesus also refused to be co-opted by Rome like the elite Sadducees had been. A question about political power came up later in the week after the Triumphal Entry, and someone asked Jesus, "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" The question was intended to be a trap, and they hoped Jesus would get Himself into hot water with His answer. But Jesus was wise and very clever in His reply, and He said, *"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" (Mk. 12:17).*

Jesus challenged the power of human rulers as well as the religious authorities, but in so doing He signed His own death warrant. And by the end of the week, the tide of popularity had turned. Jesus was accused of blasphemy by the religious leaders, and He was convicted of treason by the government. The same people who shouted "Hosanna!" now cried "Crucify Him!"

Jesus could have fought; that's what the Zealots wanted Him to do. He could have run away and joined the Essenes' desert community. Or He could have collaborated with Rome along with the Sadducees. But in the end, He did none of those things. Instead, He gave His life as a ransom for many. He did it for you; He did it for me; He did it for all of them.

Why Did Jesus Die?

Five days from now we'll observe Good Friday. It was day of mixed motives, odd alliances, secret meetings, and political intrigue. Harvard professor Ron Heifetz says that leadership can

be defined as the art of disappointing people at a rate they can tolerate. In the last week of Jesus' life, He exceeded the disappointment rate, and it got Him killed. But it wasn't a surprise to Jesus. That's what He intended to do all along. He told His disciples He was going to Jerusalem in order to die; it was why He had come in the first place. As John the Baptist said at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, Jesus was the Lamb of God who came to take away the sins of the world.

How does the truth of that reality strike you this morning? When you think about Jesus dying for you because of His great love, how does it impact you? I want to close by telling you about a man for whom it changed his life.

Nicholas von Zinzendorf was a German nobleman who was born into great privilege and power. He lived from 1700-1760, and he was one of the founders of the Moravian Church. Over the course of his life Zinzendorf spent his wealth down to practically zero in acts of compassion and pouring himself out for others? Why did he do that? What happened to motivate him so radically?

When he was 19 years old, Zinzendorf was sent by his parents to visit the great capital cities of Europe in order to complete his education, and one day he found himself in an art gallery in the city of Dusseldorf in Germany. There he saw a portrait of Jesus wearing a crown of thorns that was painted by Domenico Feti. This image of Jesus suffering was very moving to Zinzendorf, and the young man was totally transfixed by it. He stood gazing at the painting all day until the gallery closed at the end of the day. Underneath the painting the artist penned an inscription which said, "All this I did for thee; what hast thou done for Me?"

From that moment on Zinzendorf became a devout follower of Jesus Christ, and he dedicated his life and his wealth to the gospel and the great enterprise of overseas missions. His estate became a haven for building Christian community, and religious refugees came from all over. In addition, he helped send missionaries to many parts of the world, including here to Winston-Salem. After his conversion, here is what he said his life goal was: "I have but one passion: It is He, it is He alone. The world is the field, and the field is the world. And henceforth, that country shall be my home where I can be most used in winning souls for Christ."²

Earlier in my sermon I mentioned Dr. Hickey's comments about how Jesus kept marching without the band even when the cheering stopped. It's easy for us to join with others and shout with voices of praise and adoration when there is a crowd around you doing the same thing, like on Palm Sunday. But what about when we're all alone? What about when we are the only voice?

Where was Peter at the end of the week? Where were the other disciples? Where are you and I when no one else is ready to say that Jesus is Lord? Are you the only voice for Christ at work? in your home? in your neighborhood? at school? in your circle of friends? in your bridge club? How well are you marching without the band in those contexts? God's call to us is to march long and march well – with or without the band, because that's what Jesus did for you and me. And He calls us to do the same. May we be faithful in the power of God's Holy Spirit this holy week and always. To God be the glory! Amen.

¹ John Ortberg, *Who Is This Man?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 102ff.

² The details of Zinzendorf's life are drawn from Tim Keller, *King's Cross* (New York: Dutton, 2011) 151-152, and from a blog by Leighton Ford on March 18 and 24, 2021.