

Palm Sunday/Sunday of the Passion, March 25, 2018, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause (*The idea and outline for this sermon came from The Rev. Frank T. Senn*)

Yesterday demonstrations gathered in Washington, DC, across the country, and even here in Lancaster calling for solutions to shootings and killings in our schools, on playgrounds, in night clubs and rock concerts, even in churches and wherever people come together. There were also counter demonstrations of people who believe any form of gun control represents an assault on the Second Amendment of the Constitution and an individual's right to bear arms.

So, keeping this in mind, demonstration and counter demonstrations, consider that the two gospels we heard this morning also report to us two different demonstrations. Maybe in this time of demonstrations and counter demonstrations, we need to hear both.

The first gospel, heard at the beginning of our worship service this morning, is the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into the city of Jerusalem. For a couple of years Jesus has been out in the country side, teaching and healing, casting out demons, inviting men and women to follow him. Now he is going to enter the holy city of Jerusalem. He finds a young donkey to ride, and crowds spread palm branches on his path. We see it as a festive parade. And indeed it was festive, but it was also a highly charged political and provocative act. The prophets had long declared that Israel's king would come into the city riding on a donkey's colt, a sign of God's royal favor. The people who spread those palm branches smelled revolution in the air. The times they were changing.

This demonstration caught the attention of the authorities, especially the scribes and Temple priests. They were charged with keeping religious turmoil in check, in exchange for Roman tolerance of their religion. As long as no Jew tried to cause trouble the Romans allowed the religious officials some measure of freedom. But this Jesus drew a large crowd. They were calling for change. They expected an uprising, maybe even an overthrow of the regime. But how many of Jesus' followers were there, really? So they conspired with an inside man in Jesus' inner circle, arrested him at night, given him a trial of sorts, and delivered him to Pilate the Roman governor.

Here we encounter the second demonstration. Some local citizens show up at Pilate's house and request the release of a political prisoner, a custom honored during the Passover. Pilate sensed this might be a good opportunity to release Jesus, who hadn't really committed any crime. Most likely he expected the Jesus' followers, the ones who hailed with palm branches just a few days before, to show up and call for his release. But they were nowhere to be found. They had disappeared. Even Peter, the leader of the group, was off in a corner, denying he knew him. Instead, the crowd who gathered to request Barabbas's release were whipped into a frenzy, crying out for the death of Jesus.

By the time Jesus was crucified all of his disciples had disappeared. No one was to be seen anywhere near the cross. The only one, a Roman Centurion, witnessing Jesus' suffering and death, proclaimed, "Truly this was God's Son."

We read both gospels this Sunday, the palm gospel and the passion gospel, because we need to see ourselves at both ends of the week. Which crowd of demonstrators do we march with? Are we with the supporters of Jesus who threw palm branches on the road, and hailed him as king, but hid away when they might have made a difference? Or are we among those who felt a need to support the established order by asking for Jesus to be crucified? Or are we with the soldier who had a glimmer of understanding about what was really taking place?—that God needed to be involved in the world's mess, even unto death on a cross.

It's important that we know with which group we identify. That's why this is a story we need to follow throughout this week. To an upper room where Jesus washes his disciples' feet. To the Good Friday cross, that mysteriously triumphant instrument of God's salvation. To the renewal of our Baptismal covenant on the Vigil of Easter. Then maybe by the end of the week, when we celebrate the resurrection, we'll know who we'll be hanging around with when we're confronted with issues of life and death. Amen.