

March 28, Palm Sunday B (Mark 11:1-11)

Palm Sunday makes me cringe.

by [Katherine Willis Pershey](#) in the [March 10, 2021](#) issue

Read Pershey's column for the [Liturgy of the Passion](#).

Palm Sunday is, for me, a complicated affair. I was baptized as an infant on Palm Sunday, and each year I remember this with wonderment and gratitude. As a kid raised in church, I have vivid memories of stomping around the sanctuary waving my palm with impressive fervor. When I was a student pastor in California, my mentor hacked massive branches from the palm trees adorning the campus and filled the chancel with the fresh greens.

In recent years, my local ministerial association has embraced Palm Sunday as an opportunity for ecumenical convocation; the variously vested clergy and a handful of hardy layfolk gather early on the village green to bless our palms. I always ask a colleague to swap a tidily folded palm cross for one of our traditional green fronds, the way kids at summer camp trade friendship bracelets. When they were small, my daughters replicated my childhood memories, parading into the sanctuary with the children's choir.

These are all rich memories. Good memories. And yet, Palm Sunday also makes me cringe.

It is, in a word, awkward. Casual Christians tend to treat it as a sort of mini-Easter, a get-out-of-Lent-free day in the church's liturgical rhythm. As much as I love good old-

fashioned ecclesiastical pageantry, there's something fundamentally disturbing about casting ourselves—and our children—as the boisterous crowd. They seem harmless enough, with their hollered hosannas and rowdy street coronation of Jesus as King. Surely, we want to emulate their enthusiasm and echo their praise.

Yet even in all the pomp and circumstance of Palm Sunday, we can't forget where this processional is headed. The adoring throng quickly becomes the jeering mob. Jesus is not installed on a golden throne but nailed to a cross. And while Christians may like to imagine ourselves among the Palm Sunday crowd, we prefer to excuse ourselves from that company come Good Friday. It's one thing to be part of the praise chorus. It's another thing entirely to identify with the people who called for blood.

As we know, although Roman leaders killed Jesus, historically Christians have laid the blame on Jewish people. And not even just on those who were actually there. There is a toxic strain of thinking that holds all Jews for all time responsible—conveniently ignoring the fact that Jesus, his disciples, and his earliest followers were themselves Jewish. The consequences have been brutal, leading to hatred and unspeakable violence.

The crowd in this story is a delicate issue, a historical land mine, a starting point for a major crisis. Not only did the crowd's fickle loyalties contribute to the crucifixion of one Jewish man; the interpretation of that crowd's fickle loyalties has contributed to the death of millions more.

I can't help but find a tragic irony here. Christians of all times and places join the crowd on Palm Sunday—and then turn around and replace themselves with Jewish people of all times and places come Good Friday.

I reckon we have no intention of echoing the anti-Semitic sins of our spiritual forebears. Most—though not all—contemporary Christians have abandoned the morally bankrupt and catastrophic practice of scapegoating the Jewish community for the death of Jesus.

But I think we are quite likely to assume that we wouldn't have done what the people who were actually there did. We look back on the events of Holy Week through the benefit of Easter. We have heard the Good News on the other side of the violence of Good Friday. We proclaim the mystery of faith that Christ has died, has risen, and will come again. So it is nearly impossible for us to imagine that we might have participated in the events that led to our savior's death.

But the crowd that encircled Jesus in the last week of his life did not know where the story was going. They only knew that the one who came in the name of the Lord was becoming a dangerous character to associate with by the next morning. It was all

well and good when he was spending his days healing the sick and teaching in parables, but his presence and message in Jerusalem quickly became a serious threat to the powers that be. By week's end, even his closest disciples made themselves scarce.

Rather than generalizing that Good Friday crowd to include all Israel, we might universalize the crowd to encompass all humanity: there is, in our nature, a shadow side. We may have the capacity to offer magnificent praise, but we also have the capacity to be violent, treacherous, unfaithful. Whether our sins are great or small, we are sinners, fallen short of the glory of God.

Thanks be to God, then, that the one we worship has a great purpose: to save a world of sinners, even the ones who turn on him. He comes in the name of the Lord, entering the gates of Jerusalem and the gates of our hearts. All eyes turn to him, the humble king on the back of a donkey, for he is the one who can bridge the chasm between Palm Sunday and Good Friday. He is the one who can reconcile the gap between God and humankind. He is the one who can forgive and heal and redeem. He is the one who will be forsaken on the cross, yet who will never forsake us in return.