

Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday, April 13, 2014: Matthew 21:1-11; Matthew 26:14-27:66

How does a crowd turn from shouts of joy to cries of murder in such a short span?

by [Stephanie Jaeger](#) in the [April 2, 2014](#) issue

At dusk on July 1, 1985, I was sitting among the small crowd of baseball fans at Philadelphia's Veterans Stadium, waiting for the start of a Phillies-Cubs matchup, when longtime Phillies third baseman Mike Schmidt took the field wearing a long curly wig and sunglasses. A roar of laughter rose up from the crowd, in appreciation of Schmidt's effort to transform the attitude of the fans, who had been battling with Schmidt all season.

Schmidt won the World Series pennant for the Phillies in 1980, but he lost it for them in 1983. By midseason in 1985, the animosity between the crowd and the ballplayer had been stoked by the crowd's jeers—and by Schmidt's interviews, in which he described fans with words like *uncontrollable* and *mob scene*. For a few minutes that night, the crowd roared with laughter in approval and appreciation and solidarity. But nine innings later, the mood had darkened. As the aging slugger struck out with two on and two out, the hollow stadium rang only with bitter boos. I confess that I booed along with the rest of the crowd.

How did we turn from laughing to heckling in just a few hours? How does a crowd turn from shouts of joy and welcome to cries of murder in the span of a few chapters of scripture, a few days in the life of Jesus, an hour-long worship service?

In my tradition, many churches begin the Palm/Passion service with the reading of Jesus' hopeful entry into Jerusalem. We hear the people call out "Hosanna, save us" to the one who they believe will rescue them from their bondage and misery. We wave palm fronds and sing "All Glory, Laud and Honor" as we process into the sanctuary in celebration of the arrival of the king of salvation.

And then, in the middle of the service, we participate in the dramatic reading of the extended Passion story. The same mouths that shouted out their need for healing and salvation now call on the authorities to crucify Jesus. Each year, I experience anew the shock of how fickle the Jerusalem crowd is—a crowd of which I am a part. The memory of that baseball game keeps me humble, keeps me from claiming that I would somehow have behaved better than the hoi polloi of the holy city.

It also reminds me of what accounts for that dramatic and brutal shift: bitter, bone-chilling disappointment and misapprehension.

When the people welcome Jesus through the city gates, they are looking for a winner. Palm branches were used to welcome victors in war, military heroes who had saved the Jewish people from their enemies. The people wave palm branches and call out “Hosanna” because they anticipate that Jesus will save them from Roman occupation. But the would-be “king of the Jews” doesn’t act very kingly. He allows himself to be arrested, to be hung up on wood like a common criminal. When the crowds realize that Jesus isn’t the kind of hero they expected, they turn on him. Disappointment turns to rage.

What are our expectations about how God saves? Do we set ourselves up for disappointment because we confuse modes of human victory with God’s saving grace? The core revelation of Palm/Passion Sunday is this: God doesn’t save in the ways we might expect. God doesn’t rule the way humans do. God dominates with love, not violence. God overpowers through sacrifice, not by taking away. God wins by suffering, not humiliating—suffering and aligning God’s self with those who suffer.

At a parish where I used to work, a church member and friend was diagnosed with an aggressive form of incurable cancer. As Ellen came to terms with dying, she decided to write down the lessons she was learning. In the early stages of her illness, Ellen had focused on praying for a cure. In the end, she expressed her daily gratitude for God’s ongoing presence as the cancer took over her body. She had some advice for those of us who try to control God’s saving action through our expectations: develop clear intentions of what you want out of life, but don’t be attached to the outcome. Baseball fans can expect base hits and home runs from their heroes. But it doesn’t work that way with God’s salvation.

The Palm/Passion readings force us to confront our own misapprehensions about God’s rule. Each year I am reminded that through the cross God brings salvation and hope deep into the midst of common suffering. And I realize that it is people like

me—part of the crowd—whom God forgives for our false expectations and then turns into instruments of salvation and hope. At the end of our reading, Christ dies. But God's salvation continues to unfold through us. The image of Christ's crucified body, hanging lifeless from the cross, lingers in my spirits on this day. But so does my favorite benediction, from Teresa of Ávila: "Christ has no body now on earth but yours."