

These Forty Days – Palm Sunday

Matthew 21:1-11

Luke 19:28-34; Matthew 21:4-5; Luke 19:28-44

John 12:16-18

1. The Religious Leaders.

2. The Jews.

3. The Romans.

4. The Disciples.

- John 12:16; 1 Corinthians 9:25

love.learn.live.

westvalleychurch.com



These Forty Days, 6th Sunday of Lent

Palm Sunday

Matthew 21:1-11¹

Faces in the Crowd is a regular section in each edition of *Sports Illustrated* magazine. The section is an opportunity to highlight non-professional athletic achievements for people of all ages who have done something significant in any field of athletics or competition. The section began in 1954 and since then has featured around 20,000 "faces" covering 233 different sports, from baseball and track to barrel throwing and marbles. Over 7,000 of them were female, over 125 were named "Smith" and over 250 have the first name "John."

Often they will feature a young athlete who will go on to become well-known. For instance, this Willingboro HS junior was listed in 1978 for leaping 23' 6" on his first long jump to set a state HS indoor record. Can you guess who he is? He later became the US's greatest track athlete winning nine Olympic gold medals. Carl Lewis.

This guy was featured as a senior quarterback at Findlay High, set state season records for yards passing, with 4,041, and touchdown passes, with 54, while leading the Trojans to a 10--2 record. He connected on 66.4% of his throws and directed an offense that averaged 43.8 points. Ben Roethlisberger.

Want to try a few more? In 1956, *Faces in the Crowd* featured this young man. The article said, "A 13-year-old Brooklyn boy, (he) played an exhibition against 21 foes and lost only one match. He tied for first in the Manhattan Chess Club's "A" reserve tournament." Bobby Fischer.

Or how about this one: In 1990 the section listed a 14-year old boy who shot 2 under par on 72 holes to win a national youth golf tournament in Fort Worth Texas and had already won junior world titles. Here's his picture. That's right—Tiger Woods.

Here's one guy that was featured in 1958: A senior at Pomona College who starred as a distance runner in high school, plays standoff on the rugby team and starts at left end on the football team. He is also a Golden Gloves boxer, sports editor of the college paper, outstanding cadet in his ROTC battalion and a Rhodes scholar-elect. At Oxford he will study English literature to prepare for a writing career. Here's his picture: Any guesses? Kris Kristofferson.

We'll do one last one. In 2006, this young man, a senior quarterback--defensive back at Collegiate School, led the Cougars to a 38--16 win over Fork Union and their fourth straight

¹ Our Lenten reading for today is from Matthew, but I will combine it with the other Palm Sunday narratives found in all four Gospels.

Virginia Independent Schools Football Association Division I title. He completed 21 of 37 passes for 291 yards and two touchdowns and rushed 30 times for 223 yards and three touchdowns. Here's his picture: Can you guess? Yep, Russell Wilson.

Some entries are interesting but don't amount to much more than someone's 15 minutes of fame. For example, in 1966 Mary Jane Stone was listed for having a winning toss of 133' 6" in the championship of the rolling pin throwing contest. In 1960 George Craft was listed for winning the tobacco-spitting contest by "sending a brown stream 19'6" into a crosswind." In 1970 Rita Willey was noted for winning the world's first sardine speed-packing title, and in 1993 Ernest Corpus won the watermelon seed spitting contest by expectorating a seed 18'8".

The "Faces in the Crowd" feature got me thinking about what we commemorate today—Palm Sunday. The day that Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and the crowds shouted his praises just days before they called for him to be crucified. There were, on that day, faces in the crowd. There were four different faces in the Palm Sunday crowd that day that I want us to make note of. Some were quite influential on that day, either for good or bad, and some didn't affect the events of that day, but that day certainly affected their destinies. Today I want to feature those four faces, because there is a very good possibility that we will see ourselves in them, and we will need to choose which face we will be. I'm convinced that no matter who you are, if *you* were there that first Palm Sunday, you would be one of these four faces in that crowd.

Let's start with the story itself. It's recorded in all four gospel accounts, and even though our Lenten Devotional reading in "There Forty Days" was from Matthew, I've compiled all four of the stories so that you can see a more broad picture of all that took place. It's a long reading, but would you stand with me please while I read from the Gospels:

"Jesus . . . went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' tell him, 'The Lord needs it.'"

Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They replied, "The Lord needs it." (Luke 19: 28-34, niv)

This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

"Say to the Daughter of Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'" (Matthew 21:4-5, niv)

They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road. When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: "Blessed is

the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!"

"I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."

As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace--but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you." (Luke 19:35-44, niv)

At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him.

Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. Many people, because they had heard that he had given this miraculous sign, went out to meet him. So the Pharisees said to one another:

"See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!" (John 12:16-19, niv)

May God's Word accomplish His purpose in our hearts. You can be seated.

Now out of that event and that story let's look at four faces in the crowd, starting with...

1. The Religious Leaders

The Bible narrative gives us a couple of brief glimpses of how the religious leaders, or the Pharisees felt about Jesus on this day. Of course, we have some background information to help us understand their motives.

They were not happy with Jesus; he seemed to have a habit of messing things up for them. Jesus told a lot of stories, and those stories had both positive and negative examples in them, and usually the negative examples in his stories were the religious leaders.

He had good reason. Even though the Jews lived under Roman rule and oppression, the religious leaders had a pretty comfortable arrangement. They kept the Jewish people under control for the Romans, and the Romans in turn gave the religious leaders a lot of power and money.

The religious leaders seemed to confuse preserving their political positions with serving God. What was supposed to be a relationship between God and his chosen people had been

turned into a legalistic set of rules that the people had to obey if they wanted God to like them (at least, that's what the religious leaders told the people). Instead of a God who loved them, the religious leaders gave the people a God who merely put up with them as long as they kept the rules. And, conveniently, those same rules became a means for the religious leaders to keep the people in line and under their control.

Have you ever been around a church like that? A church that is so heavy on rules that instead of feeling the grace of God you feel a constant cloud of guilt?

That's not at all how God feels about us and it's the last thing he wants for us, so for good reason, Jesus had a habit of picking apart the religious leaders and their rules.

Jesus had only three total years of ministry, and it wasn't far into his first year that he began to run into opposition with the religious leaders, and by his third and last year they were looking for ways to kill Him. Jesus didn't pull any punches; He talked about how their power would drive them to kill the prophets and the Messiah Himself.

In fact, right before Jesus rode into the city, the religious leaders were plotting to arrest and kill Him.

With all that background in mind, let's look again at what the story has to say about them as Jesus was riding into the city: Luke tells us that the response of the Jewish leaders to all the people praising Him was this: "Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, 'Teacher, rebuke your disciples!'" Instead of hearing praises to the one who had come to save them, the religious leaders thought it was a bunch of inappropriate noise.

Then later John tells us that "the Pharisees said to one another, 'See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!'" Can you hear the jealousy in their tone? Here is the One who would die for the sins of the world and break the power of death, and they were lamenting what a waste of time He was and how foolish the people were for carrying on like they were.

These are the faces of people who refuse to follow Jesus because they know that to do so means they will have to give up their own power. In fact, this face is so possessed by its own sense of importance and control that he or she not only refuses to follow Jesus, he or she is actually annoyed, angered, and threatened by Him.

This is your face and mine anytime we can put Jesus first and we don't. Anytime we are given the opportunity to worship Him and we won't. We might even be in church and look good but we don't truly worship. This is our face anytime we choose to do what we want instead of allowing Jesus to be Lord in our lives, instead of giving him control. Anytime our agenda is more important to us than Him, that's *our* face in the crowd.

But there are other faces, like...

2. The Jews

These aren't the religious leaders, but these are the Jews who were gathered there. They were quick to sing the praises of Jesus, but they were doing it for a different reason.

The Jews found themselves under heavy Roman oppression. There were heavy taxes and restrictions. The Romans enjoyed executing Jews for the smallest infractions - real or fabricated – and their favorite was by means of crucifixion. Jesus, like all Jews, grew up seeing those things.

The Jews were in search of someone. They desired a king, a conqueror, someone to set them free. They had seen the mighty works of this man Jesus. They were witness to Him restoring sight to the blind. They saw the evidence of Him healing the lame. They saw Him feed the multitude with a little boy's lunch, and had leftovers to spare. They saw and heard about Him raising Lazarus from the dead. They listened to Him teach with authority. Surely, with power and authority like that, Jesus was without a doubt the one who would set them free. So, Jesus came to Jerusalem, and the crowds began to cheer.

The timing was right. It was approaching the Passover feast. That was symbolic of the event where the death angel passed over Egypt, and Pharaoh let God's children go – God miraculously and powerfully delivered them from slavery in Egypt. And now, just maybe now, Jesus would somehow lead them from the restraints and cruel treatment they received from the Roman government. They wanted Jesus to unleash Godly power and completely annihilate the Romans—in some kind of divine genocide that would leave the Jews to rule the world themselves.

Did you ever wonder how this crowd could be singing his praises and calling Him the Messiah on one day, and the next they could be crying out for His crucifixion?

It's because they expected Him to set up His kingdom with political and ethnic power. But once they saw that He had been arrested and tortured, they changed their minds. The Messiah they wanted would never let that happen to himself. So in spite of all He'd done for them, they were done with Him. They were willing to follow Him as long as He was doing what they wanted. But as soon as He stopped, they had no use for Him.

It's amazing that when things go our way, when God does what we want, when Jesus rises to our cause; it's easy to cheer. But what about when He doesn't do these things? What happens when you face oppression? What happens when you experience troubles? Too often, the cheering comes to a stop. Words of adoration and praise quickly fade when you face life as it really is.

This is the face of any of us who will follow Jesus as long as we get what we want, as long as we like what He's doing. But as soon as Jesus asks us to do something we don't like – we've had enough of Him.

Being a Christian means that we follow Him completely and wholeheartedly; when He appears to be doing what we like and when it seems He's doing something we don't like. The Jews were the fickle face in the crowd.

There was a third face in the crowd, and that was the face of...

3. The Romans

It was Passover. The Romans realized that Passover was traditionally a time that brought thousands of Jews to Jerusalem, and along with them, skirmishes and violent resistance to Rome. The Romans had not forgotten that several years earlier, Theodius of Jordan had ridden into Jerusalem with a similar greeting. They remembered how he promised to do the miracles of Elijah, and how he led a fairly large revolt. They remembered how Theodius, along with over 400 of his followers were defeated and slain, and the head of Theodius was hung on the garrison wall. They knew Passover could bring trouble.

So they watched with caution, indifference, and even curiosity. They knew of the religious leaders and their lust for power even at the expense of their own people. They watched the fickleness of the Jews as they ran from one self-appointed savior to the next looking for their latest leader and for their wishes to be granted, and then moving on when the going got uncomfortable.

The problem was that for all of God's people that lived in Rome, the Romans couldn't see God. Those who claimed to be His people were *not* representing their God at all. So those who were lost and apart from God had no idea who God was or what He was like.

These are the faces of unchurched people in West Valley. They watch us with caution—they don't want to get caught up following the next religious fad, only to find themselves empty when it dies down. They watch us with indifference because they've co-existed in this city with us for decades and have yet to see anything lasting come from God's people; they've yet to see anything we do change their lives for the better let alone for eternity.

They watch us with curiosity as God's people become worship consumers, floating from church to church, as new churches pop up and old ones close. And they go on about their lives having no idea that they could be changed forever, because they don't see it in you and me.

We have the very Good News that could revolutionize and transform their lives. We know the God who loves them so much that He gave the life of His only Son in their place. And yet they remain unchurched. Why is that?

There are too many of these faces in West Valley! But then there are the fourth set of faces in that crowd that day...

4. The Disciples

According to the story of that original Palm Sunday, the disciples were very busy. They

were obeying Jesus when He gave them the unusual order to go get a donkey for Him, so they went to a stranger's house to take the donkey, telling the owner it's because the Lord needed it.

We see them spreading their coats on the donkey for Jesus to sit on. We see them leading the donkey along the road that goes from the Mount of Olives, down through the Kidron Valley, and into the city through the Eastern gate. Along the way they are laying their outer garments onto the road in front of Him.

The closer they get to the city, the more excited they are and they begin overflowing with shouts of praise for all the amazing miracles they've seen Jesus do for people.

Then John gives us a glimpse of what was going on inside the disciples' minds. On the outside, they were caught up in the moment and having all kinds of fun. But inside they were unsure what was going on and what was going to come of it. John records:

At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him. (John 12:16, niv)

This is the face of an authentic follower of Christ! Someone who obeys Jesus and praises Jesus, even if they don't fully understand what Jesus is doing or what's going on (Actually, when you think about it, will we *ever* completely understand what Jesus is up to? Will we *ever* fully comprehend what God is doing?). The face of an authentic follower of Christ is the one who trusts Him without having to understand it all at the time. A follower of Christ knows that there *will* come a time when it will make sense to us; the Word of God—the Bible—will suddenly make sense.

The circumstances align themselves and it all fits into place. The lives of the unchurched are touched and changed because of something we're going through and then it makes sense. That's what happened to the disciples. The faces of these disciples on Palm Sunday became the faces on the Day of Pentecost that saw thousands of people accept Jesus and become followers of Christ. They trusted Jesus when it didn't make sense. And sometimes, maybe some things never will—not until we get to heaven. But the face of a follower of Christ is one that will worship and obey Him anyway.

So. Which face is yours? Which face in the crowd do you want to be? Please bow your heads and close your eyes. There is a fifth face, above the crowds. If you look, you can see it – it's Jesus, and he is looking directly at you with love in his eyes. What face is he looking into? The face of someone who won't let go of control and trust him? The fickle face of someone who only follows when it feels good? The face of someone who has never accepted him? Or is yours the face of a faithful follower who trusts him no matter what?

Prayer

Remember those examples I gave you from Sports Illustrated? There were a couple of interesting ones.

Like this guy—Mike Hairston. In 1986 he was featured because he won the Woolaroc Road Race in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, completing five miles in just over 25 minutes. You never heard of him? He actually trained for the Olympics, but blew out his knee in 1988 – so much for his athletic career. But today, today he’s a computer programmer for a fortune 500 company. He and his wife, whom he met at Oral Roberts University, have been married for 23 years and they have two sons. They start out each morning with a family hug. Tell me he’s not important to those boys. He passes out pedometers at work to promote fitness. He is a youth mentor with Big Brothers Big Sisters and mentors through “100 Black Men of Tulsa.” This guy you’ve never heard of is making a huge difference. Just a face in the crowd.

Or this person. In 2005 Karen Korb was featured because she defeated Nancy Christenson to win the National Public Parks Tennis Championship in Stamford, Connecticut. So what? It was the first time a player in a wheelchair defeated an able-bodied player. She was ranked 33rd in the world in wheelchair tennis. At 37 she became wheel chair tennis champion of the world.

But more significant beyond her sports accomplishments is what else she does. She created “Disabled Divas” – camps that promote fitness and self-esteem for disabled girls. She also teaches tennis and works with disabled veterans to give them hope.

These faces in the crowd may not be that well known for athletics, but they are making a difference in this world. So can you.

The Bible says that the trophies and the medals from sports accomplishments will all fade.

“Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.”
(1 Corinthians 9:25, niv)

You may think you are only a face in a crowd. But you are much more than that. God has a feature article He wants to write about you. The faces He’s looking for are not the faces of religious leaders or fickle followers. He’s looking for the face of authentic followers who will make a difference in the lives of the unchurched that are watching; giving them the Good News of the God who loves them by introducing them to Jesus Christ.

Which face are you?

Stand for Benediction, Numbers 6:24-26 (niv):

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;
the Lord turn *his* face toward you
and give you peace.