

If We'd Have Been There

Mark 11:1-11, Psalm 118:19-29

The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights

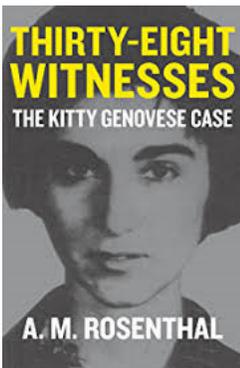
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*To hear this sermon as preached in worship, please visit
<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2019/01/sermon01132019.mp3>*

I'd like to begin by inviting you to consider two phenomena that are both very real and very much a part of your experience, but also appear to be direct opposites.

Does the name Kitty Genovese mean anything to you? I encountered her name in High School, when I had a teacher who brought up this case with astonishing frequency. I'm not sure why... Kitty Genovese was a young woman living in New York who was horrifyingly murdered on March 13, 1964. A newspaper report indicated that there were at least 38 witnesses – people who saw or heard something incredibly wrong, but who did nothing to stop the attack, which lasted more than thirty minutes.



When police questioned the man who was found guilty of this crime, they asked how he dared to attack a woman in front of so many people, and he responded by saying, "I knew they wouldn't do anything. People never do."¹

Psychologists call this pattern of behavior the "Bystander Effect" – nobody wants to get involved, nobody wants to stick their necks out for someone else, and everybody assumes that someone else will do something...

On the other hand, I imagine that you are also aware of a seemingly opposite phenomenon called "The Herd Effect". Researchers into human behavior use this term to describe

¹ Takooshian, Harold, Ph.D., "[Not Just a Bystander: The 1964 Kitty Genovese Tragedy: What Have We Learned?](#)", *Psychology Today*, March 24, 2014.

how often we find ourselves adopting certain behaviors as a result of an appeal to our emotions. This has also been described as “Mob mentality” or “pack mentality”. In situations like this, people find themselves eagerly doing something that they might typically reject simply because other people are doing it or a charismatic leader has incited a crowd. If you’d like to see a demonstration of the Herd Effect, just turn on the NFL playoffs later this afternoon, and you’ll see large groups of overweight middle-aged men stripped to



the waist, covered in body paint, and cheering on a football team in sub-freezing temperatures. Now, you have to assume that these guys are not idiots – but here they are doing something today that they would dismiss out of hand tomorrow – because their

emotions got the best of them as they prepared for the big game...

Today, we are resuming our exploration of the Gospel of Mark. When we left off, Jesus had left his ministry in the Galilee behind and had made his way to the edge of Jerusalem. Today, we see in the event that’s come to be known as “The Triumphal Entry” evidence of both the Bystander Effect and the Herd Mentality.



²Early on in our reading, Jesus instructs his followers to go and retrieve an animal that he’ll need. When they do so, they encounter a bit of questioning. “Hey, why are you taking that?” “The Master needs it.”

“Oh, OK.” You can just hear the wheels spinning in those ancient Palestinian minds... “All right, this is weird, but it’s not my circus and those are not my monkeys, so I’ll just stay out of it...” The people who watched the colt being led away didn’t say anything to anyone about what had happened –

² *The Foal of Bethphage*, James Tissot (c. 1891)

they just went about their business.



³On the other hand, as soon as Jesus shows up riding on this borrowed animal, people seem to lose their minds. Whereas at our last meeting in Jericho, it was only Bartimaeus who was calling out to Jesus, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”, now it’s a large crowd of people going in front of and behind Jesus as they sing the words to Psalm 118. There is no indication that these people actually know who he is, and Jesus himself doesn’t speak, according to Mark. Yet the crowd enthusiastically uses terms that evoke images of the Messiah, the defeat of Rome, and the reign and rule of God.

And yet at the end of the day, what do we see? Jesus retires to Bethany with his disciples. Those who had demonstrated the Bystander Effect were presumably satisfied as the colt had been returned and there was no harm, no foul. Likewise, I’m sure that there were many homes filled with people who said something like, “Wow, I didn’t see that coming today. That was sure different... What do you have planned for tomorrow...” People removed themselves from the herd and regained a sense of their own distinct lives and preferences. In fact, many of the voices that had cried out to Jesus as the Son of David on Sunday would be calling publicly for his execution on Friday – but that’s a different day, different mob...

And Jesus? Well, Jesus begins this day in quiet discussion with his friends, and that is exactly how he ends it.

Back in November of 2017, we began this study of the Gospel of Mark by pointing out that this little booklet was written for a community of Christians who were in the midst of a difficult time. They were in distress, and they were at least

³ *Palm Sunday*, John August Swanson (1994)

witnesses to, if not victims of, injustice. The group of people for whom Mark was written dwelt in a climate of fear, and lived with an awareness of the fact that outsiders were often distrusted and marginalized.



⁴And it's important for us as we study these passages that we note that Mark does not use the words "Triumphal Entry", and he does not mention palms. Instead, we meet a crowd who is obsessed with making Jesus into a conquering King. This Jesus, however, rides not a war-horse, but a colt.

The Greek word is not species-specific: it could refer to a young horse, a young donkey, and in fact once in the bible the word is used in reference to a juvenile ibex or deer (Proverbs 5:19). The point is that Jesus presents himself as weak and vulnerable; he comes in humility and is not threatening an uprising. There are no pretensions here.

As I've indicated, Mark was written to help the first generation of Christians improve their understanding of what it meant to be followers of Jesus. With that in mind, let's look at what the twelve do in this passage.

First, they obey their friend and master. When he tells them to go and get the animal, they do so.

Next, they give of themselves in simple and practical ways. This is a colt – a foal – and it's never been ridden. There would not be a saddle or other riding equipment, and so the disciples take off their own cloaks and place them on the animal to help facilitate Jesus' ride.

Then they stay with Jesus. They're there during the parade and the shouting of the crowd, and they walk back with him into the night at Bethany.

⁴ *Palm Sunday*, William Hemmerling (2001)

I think it's fair to say that those who followed Jesus on that day refused to be incapacitated by the Bystander Effect *and* they did not allow themselves to be manipulated by the mentality of the herd.

One of the things that Mark's account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem teaches me this year is that an important part of being a disciple is knowing when to use your voice, and why. In the context of following, serving, giving, and listening to Jesus, disciples have got to figure out when and why it's time to say or do something.

There is in our day and culture an ongoing controversy as to how to secure our nation's borders in such a way that allows for the safety of those who are already here and provides a means for those who are persecuted elsewhere to find shelter and hope.

Bystanders simply see what's happening and change the channel, saying something like, "Well, I'm glad I'm not the President. I hope this guy knows what he's doing..." or maybe "I've got some ideas, but what difference can I make, anyway. Forget about it..."

Similarly, there are herds of us who chant "Build the Wall!" or who stand across the street and yell "Bridges, not Walls!" We do this until we get hoarse, or until our energy is gone, or something else distracts us and then we go home...

What is a disciple to do in times like these?

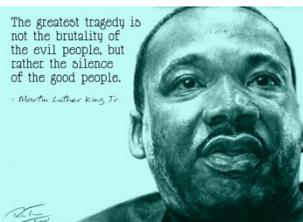
We listen for the voice of Jesus. We look for where God is on the move, and we try to get there, too. In our case, this has been a ten year process. In the last decade, more than 25 people from this congregation have visited the border between the USA and Mexico – many of us more than once. During that time, our group has had the opportunity to ride along with Border Patrol agents and see the challenges that they face each day; we've taken several tours of the facility in McAllen where the President visited on Thursday, and we've seen children sitting in glass-walled rooms crying for their parents; we've met people who have had to flee their homes in other lands after suffering unspeakable violence; and we've entered a church and school complex that is now used as a refugee center that offers those who have been terrorized a hot shower, a warm bed, and a decent meal.



In the course of this decade and these many trips, we've encountered the complexity of the situation in a way that is different than that which we've seen on television. And I'd be lying if I told you that the 25 or 30 of us who have made this trip had broad agreement as to which simple policies should be enacted in response to this crisis. But you'd be wrong if you assumed that all we were doing on these trips was hanging drywall.

We make these journeys because we realize that we need to be shaped; we need to listen; we want to grow toward the truth, and we need to find our own voices.

Listen: next week, many of you will be given an extra day off from work or school. It's a Federal Holiday in memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. When he was honored as a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, the Rev. King said, "History will have to record that the greatest tragedy



during this period of social transition was not the vitriolic words and the violent actions of the bad people, but the appalling silence and indifference of the good people. Our generation will have to repent not only for the words and acts of the children of darkness, but also for the fears and apathy of the children of light.”⁵

Listen: I know that I cannot speak for you, or for anyone else. I am struggling to find my own voice and my own words as I look for places in the world around me where God is on the move.

My challenge for you this week is to find your own voice. To listen to the news prayerfully. To read your news feed with an eye on your Gospel, and to ask the Lord when and how it is appropriate for you to speak out against violence and the oppressor, or to stand with someone who has been victimized. In what instance will you use your voice to contact your legislators or our policymakers?

Beloved of God, do not look away, thinking that it is someone else’s problem. And don’t get sucked into anybody’s mob. Listen for the Master, and be attentive to the things he does, the people at whom he looks, and the places to which he directs his energy. And follow Him there. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁵ **Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**, *January 27, 1965 Dinkler Plaza Hotel*