

“Awe in the community”  
Based on Job 38:22-30 and Mark 11:1-11  
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There are some awe moments that can only happen to us when we're alone, when there is no conversation, no distraction. When we ask God questions, like the ones that God mockingly asks Job—*has the rain a father? From whose womb did the ice come forth? How did all this wonderful world come to be?* There is plenty of awe and worship to be had in solitude.

But there is also a kind of awe that requires the presence of other people. There are moments when an awareness that we *all* are experiencing an amazing thing together produces its own kind of awe. That is part of the reason we come to church, part of the reason that Jesus said, “wherever two or more of you are gathered, I’m there.” Because here we might have a private moment with God, in our hearts, in our thoughts. Or we might feel as the old hymn says that there’s a sweet, sweet spirit in this place, that we are standing on holy ground, together, and that we experience God in our gathering, in listening, in prayer, in song, and in fellowship, together. The worship service is organized, scripted to some extent. But when it’s working, the script is just a container for the spontaneous movement of the holy spirit; something that cannot be scheduled or planned.

Emile Durkheim, the father of sociology, called the experience of awe in a community “collective effervescence.” The feeling that happens in a gathering of people when we sing or move or breathe together, as one. The feeling of oneness with one another and connection with something greater, and we understand that connecting force and that something greater to be God.

We used to find this kind of mystical connection in dance. I don’t mean like doing the Watusi or the nae-nae or even the foxtrot. I mean something more like the hora or possibly a conga line. Many cultures, maybe all cultures, have or once had this kind of folk dance. Where a group of people dances more or less in a circle, all doing the same basic thing, and there’s a joy and a oneness found in falling into step with your neighbors. Though it’s not a folk dance and not done in a circle, I recommend looking up the Jerusalema on Youtube. You will see groups of flight

attendants, doctors, students, and nuns doing the same dance, all over the world. And they are enjoying it so much.<sup>1</sup>

The first time I ever took an aerobics class, in my late twenties, I was amazed how good it felt to move in sync with other people. First of all, it made me feel like I could dance, which is not a feeling I've had very often in my life. But more than that there was something about moving to the music as well as in step with everyone else, that was a kind of pleasure I could not remember ever having had before. There is something strangely liberating about it, maybe because when you are doing it, you absolutely know that your every movement is right.

There is something like all this going on in Jerusalem when Jesus comes to town. The crowds are not dancing, but people are chanting or singing and they're all chanting the same thing: "Hosanna! Save us!" Meaning, it seems, here is the one who can save us! "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Save us!" In fact they are quoting Psalm 118, the same one we were quoting in the Call to Worship a moment ago. It's as though everyone is singing a song to which they all know the words. Kind of like when a crowd bursts into the chorus of Sweet Caroline.

And not only are they saying the same thing, they are coordinating their movements as well, laying down the palms, and the clothes on the road just in time for him to ride over them. And it's clear that as with the hora or the crowd that sings Sweet Caroline, this crowd's chanting and following is taking on a life of its own. It's one of those things that the more you do it, the more you feel the collective awe of it and the more you want to do it and do it with gusto.

I had that feeling powerfully at the end of the memorial service for Priscilla McQueen, when the band was playing When the Saints Go Marching In, and we were kind of informally processing out, and singing. And because it's such a well known song, we were singing loud, no shyness, no reserve, and everything we felt about Priscilla and life and death and God and hope was in that song.

We have to imagine that this and more was the feeling in Jerusalem when Jesus was coming into the city. The feeling as though all experience up to this point, learning the psalms, experiencing the Roman occupation, living on handouts and miracles and following this carpenter's son all the way from Galilee, all of that had

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tq-e\\_7j\\_UYc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tq-e_7j_UYc)

been leading just to this, this moment, when at last the one whom God anointed, who comes in the name of the Lord, arrives at the heart of it all.

As Presbyterians, we have a tendency to suspect that feeling. The heady moment, the effervescence of the crowd—caught up in the joy here and now—it's not really our sort of thing, is it? We're not Pentecostal. At all. We don't do ecstasy (either the drug or the emotion!) because after all, ecstasy can't really be done decently and in order. You can't rely on ecstasy or joy to pay the bills. Awe doesn't repair the soffits or fix the drainage or feed the poor.

Here's the thing about awe, whether it is individual or collective. It's a moment. I think that's what worries us good Presbyterians about seeking awe, whether in our worship or in our lives. Awe is transitory. The disciples see Jesus in shining white garments one minute and then the next minute they're jolted back to earth again. It's not always easy to see what that moment of wonder and oneness has to do with what came before or what comes after. What does it have to do with the challenges of the rest of our lives?

Palm Sunday is no exception. It's as though the story of Jesus coming to Jerusalem is put here to remind us—awe will go away. The crowd will go away. And then you're left in Jerusalem with the authorities from whom that crowd was pleading to be saved.

It's almost as though Palm Sunday is a dream. What if it's this easy, the crowd seems to wonder. Maybe even Jesus wonders. What if the messiah comes to the center of the people and he is welcomed, cheered, hailed as the coming king he seems destined to actually be? How wonderful, like a dream! But when Jesus gets to Jerusalem, he looks around a little, and then he leaves again. He goes back to Bethany, where the chanting and celebrating started. The next day, it really is as though none of this ever happened. He walks into Jerusalem with no colt, no shouting, no branches, no welcome. And he walks into trouble.

But still. Even though the joy will scatter and the cheering will turn ugly, still. This moment of collective awe is still something. It was a glimpse of a holy kind of power, a dream of a king who does not need a crown, of a leader who heals instead of killing, who lifts up instead of humiliating. Sometimes we need to catch a glimpse of the thing that is worth saving. What we see in the story of Palm Sunday is in one sense the thing that Jesus is dying for. A world ruled as God would rule it. A place where people who pray for salvation see it riding in and welcome it with open arms. A celebration of the coming of the kingdom of God.

It turns out not to be so easy as the crowd for a moment believes it to be. They have other things to do, taxes to pay; they come back to earth and leave Jesus alone, where he is incredibly vulnerable to all kinds of authorities. It's a much, much longer process, getting to the kingdom of God, and there is a much higher price to pay. But those who were there with the palms and the chanting remember. And we who experience the day through sacred story remember. Maybe it was a kind of dream, but it is a dream that fuels us, through Good Friday and far, far beyond. Amen.