Election Distress: *Jesus Had a Thing about Crowds*

Elections are semi-controlled and ritualized crowd phenomena. Reading from today’s lectionary takes place in a crowd. Passover is just around the corner so crowds are gathering in Jerusalem. Jesus is drawing big crowds in/around the Temple. For his disciples, the crowds are a measure of his worth and theirs. They want Jesus to leverage his popularity to overthrow the Roman Occupation Force. No doing that without a crowd.

But Jesus had a thing about crowds. He loved the people in the crowds but he didn’t trust what happened to people in crowds.

Since beginning of human time, groups wracked with internal conflicts had a single mechanism to achieve a temporary peace. As accusations went flying and conflicts multiplied, the community would single out an individual or group and coalesce into a hate mob. Once the unlucky ones were expelled or killed, contagious violence would end for a time. For perhaps thousands of years, this was the first and only way to keep the peace.

Archaic myths bear witness to this—a thought-to-be-guilty victim whose death brings peace, founds a city, a nation, a world order. The God Jesus loved was different: YHWH was the god who proclaimed the innocence of those thus targeted as what we now call—thanks to the Hebrew Scriptures—a scapegoat. One could say the innocence of scapegoated individuals/groups is the unique revelation of the Hebrew Bible, culminating in the Jewish Messiah—an innocent who lost his life at the hands of a crowd, and rose from the dead to demonstrate his innocence.

All other myths were told by the lynchers, but this story, the gospel story, would be told by the lynched and his followers.

So Jesus had a thing about crowds: he didn’t trust them, even when they were supporting him. And he didn’t want his disciples to trust them either. Let’s take this in sections.

I. When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.

He’s saying Don’t be awed by what awes the crowd. In this case, it’s the crowds shared desire for the opulence of the temple.

Crowds are often animated by a shared desire. Could be all in good fun at first, but it can turn ugly. In 2003, Chicago Cubs 5 outs away from getting in the World Series. Cub fans united by a
shared desire. Awesome energy! Florida Marlins batter pops up into foul territory and the Cubs outfielder was about to catch the ball when a lifelong Cubs fan reached out for it and unwittingly deflected the ball from the Cub outfielder’s glove. Marlins rallied and beat the Cubs. The fan had to be escorted away by the police for his own protection and go undercover when his name and address were made public on Major League message boards.

Temple crowds united by desire for Temple’s beauty. Disciples of Jesus feeling connected to crowd by this energy. But Jesus knows how fast crowds can turn. He’s on a mission that will soon be misunderstood by the crowd and it will turn on him. They are ga-ga over the Temple, and he’s throwing cold water on them, to keep them getting swept up by the crowd which shares their desire.

II. They asked him, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?” And he said, “Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is near!’ Do not go after them.” He’s saying, “Watch out for those who use crowd energy for ends that have nothing to do with me.”

He’s not talking about generic bad leaders whipping up crowds for bad ends. He’s talking about people using his name to this end.

In highly contentious Passover season, varied interests were vying to direct the energy of these very crowds taken with Jesus: Roman interests, the household of corrupt king Herod, the Jerusalem elite who benefited from the extraction economy that subsidized the Temple complex at the expense of the peasantry. Soon, this Jesus-loving crowd would be turned against him by such interests.

Jesus knew even his closest disciples could get turned by a crowd, especially when the scapegoat mechanism kicks in.

Crowds are prone to manipulation. Someone gives voice to shadow side of human nature, starts slingling accusations against vulnerable groups and individuals, and unless it’s checked, you have a lynch mob. He’s talking about this happening in his name.

It’s a special warning for his followers. Peter demonstrated that even his closest disciples are not immune to the power of crowds even when they turn on Jesus.

Any religion can be manipulated in this way and Christianity is no exception. Christians in Europe have done this many times when fascists whipped up the anger of crowds against various groups. Christians in the United States have done this many times in our history. Billy
Graham publically apologized when the Nixon tapes were released and he was heard agreeing with Nixon’s diatribes against the Jews. Nixon was courting Graham because he wanted access to his crowds.

We should not be surprised when 81% of White Evangelicals supported a leader who directed the frustrations of a crowd against people of color, immigrants, Muslims, journalists, women who did not fit his mold. Now we have virtually every minority group living in a state of high alert, many in our own congregation. This is not theory. This is real and it’s now.

These words— “Do not go after them”—are for a time like this.

The danger is not just what Jesus calls the false prophet, per se, but the crowds they gather. Many of us have dear loved ones, good people, who are swept into this. It takes courage and it takes wisdom to be faithful when we’re at home for thanksgiving with people we love. Next week talk about some strategies for this challenge. Showing contempt, for example, isn’t the way.

And the fact that this warning comes to Jesus closest disciples who have left all to follow him, should humble us. We are not above needing to hear: “Beware that you are not led astray”

III. "When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately." Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. "But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name.

Background: “wars & insurrections” are reference to Jewish-Roman Wars that began in 66 AD, ended 136. Three Jewish revolts that led to crushing defeats. Jesus is speaking in 26 AD: he sees war with Rome coming but not immediately. He’s predicting a window for gospel to spread in region, but always under threat of persecution. Not end of the world so much as end of their world.

He’s saying Don’t be alarmed by the terror that flows through crowds.
Humans are mammals and most mammals are herd animals. If the gazelle’s on the edge of the herd see a preying attack animal, they get alarmed and the alarm shoots through the herd. So fear shoots through crowds as a survival mechanism of evolution. We are biologically vulnerable to contagious fear.

But Jesus is warning against this. **When you’re feeling fear-contagion, question it.** Don’t be alarmed by rumors of wars and insurrection. Many more rumors of disaster than actual disaster.

**But that’s not exactly his point is it?** Jesus is not denying there will be wars and insurrections. Certainly will be. In fact, after saying “**Don’t be terrified**” he goes on to talk about a great period of distress, and persecution for his followers in particular.

**Can we agree that there isn’t a trace of sugar-coating on this “Don’t be terrified”?**

When things are really bad, the sugar-coating on the comfort is worse than the fear, isn’t it? In first few months after Nancy died, if anyone said, “She’s in a better place” or “I see her dancing and playing the tambourine” I wanted to vomit. A few times I said, “I’m not worried about Nancy, I’m missing her like crazy.”

This is what we call sugar-free comfort: **Don’t be terrified by rumors of wars and the rest. These will come before it’s all over, but first you’ll suffer persecution just as I will: arrested, brought before hostile rulers, betrayed by your closest friends (just as I will be)—hated by the crowds, as I soon will be.**

**Looking for a silver lining?** All we have is, “You will bear witness even to some powerful people, but don’t be nervous, I’ll give you the words when the time comes.”

My priest wife Julia called this an AFGO. **What’s that?** I ask. *Another effing Growth Opportunity.*

**But actually that’s a big silver lining.** My dad was in the infantry and he said the biggest fear wasn’t getting killed, it was not doing your job and letting others down. (Getting killed of course was a big fear but this other was worse.) That even bigger fear is the one Jesus speaks to here: you’re not gonna blow it: I’ll give you the words to bear witness.

The witness, in this context, is to the innocence of everyone targeted by the crowd. When a presidential candidate is asked, “Do you support a registry of all Muslims in the United States” and he says, “I would implement that, absolutely” That’s when the followers of Jesus say, “Put our names on the registry”
So there’s that silver lining: we will be given power to bear witness when the time comes.

But there’s also this not-insignificant-addition at the end of today’s reading: **But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.**

If you have had it with words of sugar-coated comfort from those who have nothing to worry about because they aren’t the targets of any angry mobs... then you’ve probably developed an allergy to almost every word of comfort when you see an s-storm shaping up. That allergy is to the sugar-coating. And it’s well advised.

But these are different words, because they are the words of someone who will soon be scapegoated. He will lose it all, and then he will gain it all. “The hairs of your head” that won’t perish are the ones on the resurrection body. Resurrection faith says, “No matter what happens, in the end, you’re going to OK.”

And what this crazy faith generates is people who are willing—in the midst of an anxious crowd forming into a mob—to separate from that mob and bear witness.

That’s what the book of Acts, the sequel to Luke’s gospel, is about. In the book of Acts, ringleaders are stirring up mobs in all different places, the followers of Jesus are targeted by the mobs, and in the middle of all that unfolding they stand up and bear witness.

*Whatever actually unfolds over the next few years, let’s stay close to this Jesus. He’s an inspirational leader who knows this territory and we need some inspiration.*

*And let’s stay close to each other and to the people around us, especially those in a state of heightened alert and distress.*

QUIET REFLECTION: EMILY
When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, `I am he!' and, `The time is near!' Do not go after them.

"When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately." Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

"But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."