

“The Art of Jesus: First a Parade. And Then He Passes”

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I am so happy to stand before you and announce that – I got it! It’s only taken me 30 years, but I think I finally got it today. I have struggled with understanding Palm Sunday my whole ministerial career and here’s why . . . it begins with such joy and happiness. And I love that. The waving of palm branches. The shouting out – “Hosanna! Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” It’s a display of religious enthusiasm that is so wonderful to behold. I was baptized as a boy on Palm Sunday and I have so many fond memories of that day.

I still like the story about the little boy who had to miss Palm Sunday because he had a sore throat. The parents got a sitter, went to church, came back holding their palm branches. The little boy asked, “Why do you have palm branches?” The parents said, “Oh, palm branches were waved over the head of Jesus.” And the little boy said, “That’s my luck! The one Sunday I miss church, he shows up!”

You can feel the energy of Palm Sunday when you read the New Testament. Jesus made his way to the city of Jerusalem, and there is so much promise, so much hope, so much feeling in the air that day. So many of the Jewish people felt as if a new day was about to dawn in the person of Jesus!

William Blake once said that, “Exuberance is beauty!” And I don’t know about you, but I personally think every single one of us, including myself, could use a little more exuberance and beauty in our lives. Life is short and it’s hard and it’s full of challenges, but joy comes to us in the morning if we have the faith to embrace it. This is why I love Palm Sunday.

But then the mood begins to shift. As soon as the parade is over, Jesus begins moving toward his death. Not slowly, but quickly. The events of his last few days become a blur of humiliation and betrayal. His followers are excited and happy, to be sure, which is why they lined the streets with palm branches, but the Roman government is not happy with Jesus. They see Jesus as a threat to the Pax Romana, and so a bogus trial is arranged, and they make it look like it is a religious trial, but it’s not a religious trial, it’s a political trial. The week begins with great joy but it moves so quickly to violence and death.

And that’s the vexing problem of Palm Sunday. How do you hold these two polar opposites together? Joy and pain? Happiness and sorrow? Celebration and tragedy? And where’s the truth of human existence? And I mean that as a real question. Is the truth of life joy? Or is the truth of life pain?

Take a look at our painting today from Georgia O’Keefe. This painting of the “Black Cross” is stunning. As you know, O’Keefe lived much of her life in New Mexico, and if

you've ever spent any time there, you know the landscape around Santa Fe and Taos is amazingly beautiful. She really discovered her artistic genius in that sparse landscape surrounded by the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. She is perhaps best known for some of her huge flower paintings, where one flower would take up a whole canvas. But she was also taken by the many crosses in New Mexico. Little churches, mostly adobe, dot the landscape, and each church displays crosses. Sometimes the cross is a dark figure against a cerulean sky.

You see the starkness of New Mexico in this painting. The black cross in the painting is large. Very large. It dominates, just as the Catholic Church once dominated the landscape of New Mexico. You see the wooden pegs. You can almost feel the texture of the cross. And what is the cross for the Christian religion? It's a symbol. It points to something beyond itself. Yes, it is a symbol of the suffering of Jesus, but it also points to your suffering and my suffering.

Our pain is real in life. We don't just make it up. It's not just in our minds. And it's not the case that God is going to make it all okay. Sometimes it's not okay. If you saw the movie "Manchester by the Sea," then you know what I mean. Sometimes our pain is never going to be okay. And that means any view of God that diminishes or underestimates our suffering is not a view of God that makes sense to me.

So when you look at this cross this morning, you should see your own human struggles. And you see the struggles of the homeless. You see the struggles with cancer or addiction. You see chemical weapons in Syria, chemical weapons that killed children this week in Syria, the kind of weapons that are a crime against humanity.

You see the saber rattling of North Korea that potentially threatens places like Seattle and San Francisco and Los Angeles. You see environmental suffering, that kind that keeps moving us toward catastrophic climate change. What I'm trying to say this morning is that the cross in the Christian faith is a symbol; it's a symbol that points us toward the reality of our human suffering.

I had a conversation with a friend this week that really brought this home to me. She is older. I don't know how old, but she is older. Ten years ago she expectantly lost her husband. Last summer she lost her beloved brother. And this week she told me that her daughter, who is probably in her fifties, has terminal cancer. I mostly listened. I have no answers. I mostly listened.

But I'm not sure I've ever seen more bewilderment on the face of another human being as I saw on her face this week. What you don't think about when you're young, but you do, as you grow older, is that the losses in life begin to pile up. It's one. And then another. And then another. And in the case of my friend . . . there is nothing theoretical about it . . . it's not a sermon illustration . . . it's not some kind of theoretical actuarial statistic . . . it's her life. And it's real for her. Just as your life is real to you. It's her daughter. That's what the cross means. It means that our human suffering is real.

But the cross also points us to the suffering of God. What does that mean? It means that in the dying of Jesus we learn something about God. That God uses power in the world, but it's not dictatorial power and it's not military power and it's not coercive power. The power of Jesus was not that he was stronger than the Romans!

The power of Jesus was that he could forgive those who were hurting him, that he could bless those who were betraying him, and that he could love those who deserted him. That's power! And that's the kind of power God uses in the world. And that makes sense, because God cannot make people be good, because to make someone be good makes about as much sense as requiring someone to love you. That's not how it works. God invites us to be good.

When the great Christian theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was in a Nazi prison years ago he wrote in one of his letters: "Only a suffering God can help." Not a bully God. Not a dictator God. Only a suffering God can help. Why? Because a suffering God is a God that loves, and in the end love is the only thing that puts our lives back together.

This is why the apostle Paul would write in one of his letters that we are made strong by the weakness of God. What does that mean? What do you mean that God is weak? It means that God loves to the point that God is willing to be broken and crumbled and nailed to a cross. And God hangs on a cross, broken hearted for those who died in Syria this week. And God hangs on a cross, broken hearted for my friend Maryann.

So, I love this painting by Georgia O'Keefe, but I love it for more than the cross. When you look at the painting, you also look beyond the cross. The painting says that suffering is real, but there is something else real too. You see the hills at the bottom of the painting. These are the mountains of New Mexico.

They look like the backs of elephants stacked side by side. And then there is that thin line of light. It's orange and yellow and white and a little bit red. It's out on the horizon, but it's there in all its splendid beauty. It's not as big as the cross, but in its own way, the light is just as strong as the cross. Maybe even stronger.

And that's the insight for Palm Sunday for me. I used to think we had to get through the bad times to get to the good times. I no longer believe that. Because times are always bad. And if they are not bad at your house today, then they are bad at your neighbor's house, or the next house, or the next house, or the next house. We never get beyond bad times. I used to think that light would overcome the bad times. That God would be triumphant.

But I'm not so sure light really triumphs in life. Remember what they called World War I? It was the war to end all wars. And then there was World War II. And then the Korean War. And then the Vietnam War. And then the Iraq War. So, I'm not optimistic about a triumph.

But here we are on Palm Sunday, and it's a reminder to me that one of the keys to the spiritual life is to hold both the parade and the crucifixion inside our hearts at the same time. It's both. It's always both. Just as this one canvas holds both a cross and a luminous horizon of light. It's both. Life is good today. Here we are. We have each other. And music. And children waiving palm branches. We'll go out and have a taco tonight. And a margarita. Life is good. And children are dying in Syria. And an older mother is worried sick about her daughter. Life is bad.

Palm Sunday invites us, not to deny the tension between the good and bad, but to embrace it. It's both. It's always both. And that tension – parade and cross – is not trying to tear us apart; it's trying to open us up to a new place of humility and love and gratefulness, and yes, seeing God working within all of it.

Friends, I love you all, and I know every Sunday you carry this tension within you – that life is good and bad – and I want to say in a personal way – thank you for loving me these many years – because I carry this tension within my body too. Thank you. I love you all. Amen.