

Matthew's Passion Narrative

Today is the last of Lent's six Sundays, the Sunday named for the palms stripped from trees along the road with which the people of Jerusalem welcomed Jesus into the Holy City with exclamations of joy and Hosannas of praise. In hours, those palms would be symbolically woven into the reeds with which Jesus' head was lashed, into the crown of thorns by which the authorities mocked and humiliated him, and into the whips with which the Romans soldiers scourged his body, urged on by the crowd's ever loud cries of crucify! crucify! How quickly the exclamations of exaltation turned into shouts of denigration and denial.

The invitation of the congregation to participate in the reading of the Passion (each year rotating though the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke) reminds us that this narrative of 2000 years ago is a narrative well known in our time. It is a drama lived and acted out throughout the world--every day of every year, sometimes in lesser--sometimes in more dramatic ways in every one of our lives.

Just up the street at the Westport Country Playhouse, extraordinarily talented actors pour their hearts, souls and imaginations into the interpretations of brilliant playwrights, aided by masterful directors and many others, that audiences be moved, humbled, shaken, renewed, healed, and restored by the revelation of parts of our lives--sometimes too dark and fearful, sometimes too comical and embarrassing, sometimes too painful and sensitive for us to touch and grasp any other way. On this Palm Sunday without invitation call back, rehearsal, or direction other than Elsa's nod, the curtain was raised on the first act of this extraordinary drama we call Holy Week.

In this reading on this stage we call life, we assume various roles in this Passion Narrative, this Passion Drama. Some of us became the High and chief priests--overshadowed and enraged by this upstart Galilean calling himself the Son of Man, able to do miracles, rousing the hopes and passions of the poor, the oppressed and the neglected. Others of us played innocent bystanders "knowing nothing" of the incendiary hatred of Rome and its puppet rulers--Herod and Pilate, and the Jewish people crushed under the weight of political and religious oppression. Others of us played the crowd swayed and influenced by whatever favorable political and financial winds were blowing, getting along by playing along. Yet even in calling for his crucifixion, we agonized over another crushing disappointment of unfulfilled dreams and expectations that someday, somehow we might live and feel truly free.

It is, you see, a story from a long time not unlike our own lives--its is, in fact, the story *of* our lives--lives in one moment filled with high hopes and dreams and in the next, torn asunder by unmet expectations and despair. The reading of the Passion is a reminder to us that not only in praise and adoration but also in resistance and even outright rejection that God *bears all things*--humiliation and denial, *endures all things*--beatings and crucifixion, and *hopes all things*--that we might turn from our self absorbed ways to discover our deepest, most real selves in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The Forty Days of Lent, marked in the beginning with ashes, has brought us, as if a journey, through the wilderness, through Lent's long weeks, all through this time of disciplined and attentive preparation, till this Sunday and our destination. We noted the importance of pilgrimages such as crusading nights on quests or the Cowardly Lion, the Tin-Woodman, the Scarecrow and Dorothy on that long journey seeking what in fact was never lost but hiding deep inside themselves. Our intent has been to find a deeper connection with Christ and our faith. And so we have come to the Jerusalem, the holy city, of whom poets and psalmists have languished and wept for centuries, where the cataclysmic events of Holy Week will find their ignominious end.

My friends, this day and each day which follows this Holy Week is an invitation for us to embrace and be embraced by all the feelings—excitement and fear, joy and embarrassment, wonder and dismay, hope and pain of our lives knowing that God in Jesus Christ walks every step of the way with us. Our God to whom we pray to make our lives full, safe, and secure will struggle, suffer and die, not as something separate and isolated from the hard stuff of life, but as a human being deeply and eternally rooted in life. How close dare we allow ourselves to be with the Lord as he journeys through the week we call holy? The events of Jesus' passion, his suffering, are the most "human" ones in his life. Previously, he has ministered to others in their pain, healed the sick, wept at the grave of friends, felt the fears of those who worried over the loss of financial security. Now, the tables are turned and we see and experience the real vulnerability of God.

Often, I have heard the challenge that the church, our faith, our liturgy, our community is out of touch with, removed from the real world. Some say that what is said, sung and offered on a Sunday or weekday is isolated, separate from our everyday lives. Our challenge this day is to allow ourselves to be as close to the Lord as possible, to remember and note that our God, the creator of heaven and earth is also Jesus on the cross; is also in the denial and retractions of Peter and the disciples, in the betrayal of Judas Iscariot, in the pontificating of Pontius Pilate as all the Roman authorities and religious leaders of the day.

At every step of the way we are invited to make choices how we wish to view the person and life of Jesus the Christ. Betrayal, heartbreak, and death do not just happen; they occur as a consequence of the choices we make in life. Dare we trust this man, this God who rises from the worst and overcomes all in the resurrection of the dead? Dare we trust a God who can, more than wear a mask of sorrow and joy, live into and from that real place of conflicted emotions? Dare we trust our God, or will we go our own way, alone?