

Pain makes things truly real

John 12: 12-19 Jesus enters Jerusalem

John 19: 16a-22 Crucifixion of Jesus

The great poet Rumi writes, “the grief you cry out from draws you toward union”. This service began with shouts of Hosanna and ends with the cries of crucifixion. Palm Sunday signifies the beginning of Holy Week and the call of all followers to step out into the world and walk the road with Christ.

Like any road that we haven’t taken before we enter it with anticipation, with excitement, with trepidation and with some fear of what is to come. But in this case we have taken this road to Jerusalem with Jesus many times. We know what will happen, and how this will end. We know that there are dangers ahead and that Jesus faces judgment, ridicule and betrayal. We know that as Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey on one side of the city on the other side of the city the Roman army with horses and chariots and gleaming armour await. We know that the city itself is bursting with people preparing for the Passover feast to celebrate the deliverance of the Hebrew people out of slavery and to celebrate that they are God’s chosen people, but it’s a highly charged situation.

The tension is mounting in the city as Jesus rides in. And as his followers and other zealous onlookers begin to chant for the arrival of a man who has a reputation of healing, of rebelling against the rules, a man who has done miracles, who has dined with the unclean and the undesirable. Pilate is worried. Worried about what this could mean; he is fearful of a revolt, an uprising that could knock down the empire, the power that this one humble man seemed to have as the crowds gathered. But God did not send a warrior who would lead armies on horses or chariots yelling “Charge!” God sent a man of humble beginnings. God sent us Jesus, the Word made flesh, who is vulnerable, who is caring, and who rides into the city on a donkey. God sends a man who has embraced servanthood, not kingship.

Servanthood is defined as an offering of service to others as a result of a choice made by the one providing service. Jesus chose to serve God’s people in every way that he can imagine. Now according to the Gospel of John, Jesus does make the choice. He makes the choice to for what is to come. He makes the choice to not defend himself, but to follow through and to die.

Barbara Brown Taylor a theologian has come to the realization that the world religions, most of them, have grown out of suffering. Christianity rises out of the suffering of Jesus at the hands of his own people. She writes:

“Christianity began when Jesus emerged from his own wilderness to minister to the suffering of an occupied people; occupied not only by Rome, but also by the fear that their long oppression meant that God had abandoned them. He addressed his fear by healing the sick, feeding the hungry and freeing those who were possessed by demons even though his care for other peoples’ pain put him at great risk of bringing pain upon himself. His death on a Roman cross became both the epitome of human suffering and proof that even suffering such as that could not force one chosen by God to leave the path of love.”¹

Jesus suffered, but in this version of the last moments of Jesus’ life we never hear Jesus cry out. We also don’t hear the Jewish people cry out in grief. I sense that we would hear the faint cries of the women and some of the disciples and other followers near the cross crying out in grief which was drawing them closer to Jesus who was hanging on a cross. Now the Jewish people that spoke with Pilate which we hear in the last bit of the scripture that Jessica read, in these words I wonder what was behind them. Are we hearing spiteful people? Are we hearing fearful people? Is it justification because of what’s happened and they don’t want to take the blame? Is it shame?

They wanted to make sure that everyone who saw Jesus on the cross would know that it was Jesus who said he was the king of the Jews, but this is untrue. Jesus never once, according to the Gospels, uttered those words; never claimed for himself, ‘I am the king of the Jews.’ He always answered with things like, well you say that I am or with questions. Yet the people, his people, placed these words upon him as did the Romans. The Jewish people clearly wanted to make sure that it was Jesus who thought he was king of the Jews.

These are the moments where in our culture I wish we could press rewind, we could go back to look in great detail at what actually happened and what was actually said to prove to the people that he didn’t actually say this. I don’t know about you, but I have gotten to the point now where as I am listening, I am not really listening, and I want to rewind the radio to hear what just happened and I missed it and I am frustrated, because we relied on it so much. But the reality of the times in which Jesus lived was that things were not recorded. It was an oral society, which meant we relied on the witness and the stories being told by the people who saw and heard what happened. Can you imagine what would happen if Pilate could have proven to the people that it was actually them that placed this title on Jesus? What if they were able to watch the play-by-

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, (New York: Harper One, 2009), p. 156.

play and see how they turned the tables? Would this have made a difference? Or was it destiny; destined to happen no matter what.

Friends, during Holy Week at this moment, we are being invited to “join in God’s act and action of redemption.”² We need to find a way to practice the feeling of pain; to walk toward the pain rather than masking it or turning away from it, for it is pain that makes things real. It’s in moments of pain we can’t help but reach out and encounter the Holy, the Divine. So how will you choose to enter Holy Week? Will you, like so many, avoid Holy Week and simply come at Easter ready for the great celebration, or will you take the time to be with Jesus, in those moments that he shares with his disciples, in the moments where he prays for strength and courage and in the moments where he is put on trial and has to find a way to remain calm, to not fight back and to be true to his call. Will you be like the women and the men who held vigil at his grave in preparation for the moment of resurrection?

We need to think about how in that moment when the Jewish people told Pilate to change the words on that, they were breaking promises. What kind of promise did they break? Were they like Peter who denied knowing Jesus? Were they like Judas who betrayed him or were there others that did things because of the anticipation and the anxiety that was going on in the place where they were at that moment? Or were they just unsure of what to do and felt bad that it all happened and there was no way out and so they didn’t want to be the ones blamed for what was going on? What broken promises and lost hopes and unanswered prayers and severed relationships, grief and death are we faced with as we enter Holy Week? How will we walk into our pain so that we too can enter Easter transformed, walking the path of healing and wholeness so that we can live in abundant life with God; the abundant life that God has given us.

In a book I have been reading recently called “The Very Good Gospel”, it says:

“Healing prayer invites God to come in close to the healing deep wounds from our past by identifying the lies we have believed about ourselves, about God and about others, and replace the lies with truth.”³

One of the ways we can enter Holy Week is through prayer and we pray that we can learn to let go of lies that we have been telling ourselves that are untrue, so that we can live in truth as Jesus did. Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that “for those willing to stay awake, pain remains a reliable altar in the world. A place to discover that a life can be as full of meaning as it is of hurt.”⁴ This is a powerful week; one that can transform our lives, one where we can choose to live as God would want us, and be people in this world who speak truth to one another. Where we reach out to one another in the ways that Jesus did where we seek to heal and be gracious to each other instead of tearing each other down in order to not be blamed, feel shame or to feel out of control.

² James E. Lamkin, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B Volume 2, p. 308.

³ Lisa Sharon Harper, *The Very Good Gospel: How Everything Wrong Can Be Made Right*, Kindle Edition, p. 78

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor _____ p. 173.

There is much suffering in this world and as we have gone through Lent, we have talked about the different stages of grief, but they are stages that when we walk through them we can move towards healing and wholeness. And when we are whole our love is witnessed in everything we do. So know that you are worthy of God's love and just like the people who have betrayed Jesus. Jesus, even after being judged, judges us with grace, judges us with unconditional love. We are worthy. We are loved and we have a role to play in this world. So go into this world in peace, go into this world and witness to where the Spirit is at work and proclaim those stories boldly to one another.

Amen.