

Holy Week: It's an Intrusive Moment

Palm/Passion Sunday

Luke 19:28-40
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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The Bible, in my opinion, should be approached and experienced more as a living document than as an historical one. What does that mean? From a progressive standpoint, it means that we must move these ancient stories out of their historical context enough to seek a metaphorical understanding and thus a practical application or parallel to our own lives.

For instance, when we reflect upon the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday, and reflect upon the events of the week that led to Jesus' arrest and execution, which we call Passion Sunday, do we simply hear them as particular and peculiar moments in history, OR can they also be understood metaphorically as events that happen again and again in our own lives?

The latter approach is the one taken by most modern biblical commentators. For instance, in an article by the Rev. Dr. Hugh Eichelberger, a retired Presbyterian minister living in North Carolina, he reflects:

I understand that Good Friday was an actual day – the day on which Jesus was crucified, but I also see Good Friday as a way of thinking about all the tragic, senseless, unjust experiences that come in life, that defy understanding, and make the love of God look like a mockery. **In every life [including yours and mine] there are Good Friday days where all good hopes seem to die and there appears to be no justice. In the midst of our Good Fridays we wait, and hope and long for Easter.**

In a similar relatable fashion, we can ask: What is Palm Sunday? How does it relate to those moments when we experience the Sacred Presence of God breaking into our own lives? Eichelberger answers that question this way:

Palm Sunday is an intrusive moment. Jesus has quit preaching and gone to meddling. Palm Sunday began to go bad when it became clear that Jesus was a threat to the way things were organized in the city of Jerusalem. **On Palm Sunday it becomes clear that when God enters our lives, [when we recognize and acknowledge God's Presence], God not only blesses, heals, teaches and leads, God also confronts and disturbs.**

Palm Sunday happens when we discover and hear that God has not entered our lives to help us do *our* work, but that **God has come to call us back to do God's work.**

Perhaps that's another way to explain **the process of repentance**, which is something we have been looking at throughout this Lenten season – **a recognition and**

a calling to live life according to the ways of God: ways of love, compassion, justice, peace, forgiveness, reconciliation, and new life. **Dare I ask: How is your repentance going this Lenten season?** Eichelberger continues:

Jesus was welcomed because it was expected that he would be of service to the city, and of service to the national ambitions of the Jews [whose city was occupied by Rome], but instead he called the city [and the religious leaders] to **repentance [as in, turning away from the things opposed to the ways of God]. Whenever our lives are disturbed in that way, Palm Sunday happens.**

The only reason we need to fear in the presence of God is if we are more committed to keeping things the way they are than we are open to welcoming God into our lives.

And, I would add, to **allow ourselves to be transformed by that divine intrusion.**

We are entering a special week in the life of the Christian church. This is Holy Week. Given that, I think it best to approach this week not as a collection of four completely separate services of worship: Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and finally Easter. Rather, I'd like us to approach this week as one long contiguous service. For each is an intricate piece of the puzzle that's needed to have a fuller understanding of the life and ministry of Jesus, and thus the nature and character of God.

It really doesn't make any sense if we simply celebrate Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on this Sunday, and come back next Sunday and celebrate Jesus' resurrection. A good 20%-25% of the gospel story occurs between these two Sunday. So each of our services this week is really open-ended. Each tells it's own part of the story, a connected story that only makes sense in its entirety.

The Rev. Claire Feingold Thoryn, in a blog posted just a couple days ago on patheos.com (and you wonder why I wait until Saturday morning to finalize a sermon) entitled, "Power, Politics, and Palm Sunday: Which Leader Will You Follow," provides a similar approach to Holy Week.

Palm Sunday is the story of a triumphant entry into certain doom. In-between Palm Sunday and Easter is the valley of betrayal, despair, and loss. The fact is, **Holy week isn't just one week. It is every week, every year, every lifetime—the highs and the lows, the greatest joys and most cutting hurts, truth and deception, love and hate, birth and death.**

If the Christian story of Holy Week only had Palm Sunday and Easter, it wouldn't be much of a story. A religion with only tales of triumph and happiness is no religion at all.

Holy Week, then, provides a scathing commentary on what Jesus Seminar scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan refer to as the domination system. They write:

It is important to realize that what killed Jesus was nothing unusual. [As] empires go, Rome was better than most. There was nothing exceptional or abnormal about it; this is simply the way **domination systems** behave. So

common is this dynamic that it can also be called the normalcy of civilization. **Good Friday was the result of the collision between the passion of Jesus and the normalcy of civilization.**

Following this line of thinking, Thoryn reflects, "The normalcy of civilization keeps the powerful in power, keeps the wealthy rich, keeps the poor poor. The normalcy of civilization keeps refugees out. The normalcy of civilization lets poor sick people die [for lack of affordable health insurance] while rich sick people live [because of greater access to healthcare]. The normalcy of civilization gives white men assault rifles and puts black men in jail. We live in a very normal civilization. **When will come the fall of our Roman empire?"**

Fr. Dwight Longenecker, also in a post just a few days ago on patheos.com entitled, "Ten Traits of the People Who Killed Jesus," refers to **the domination system within organized religion as anti-religion or false religion.** His words are harsh, but I believe accurate.

It subverts the true aims of any religion and twists it into a horrible counterfeit. Where true religion promotes charity this anti-religion promotes exclusivism and blame. Where true religion promotes simplicity and humility the counterfeit is ornate and proud. Where true religion serves the poor, the counterfeit blames the poor.

Where true religion is full of humor, the counterfeit is self righteously unsmiling. Where true religion cultivates freedom, the false religion is legalistic. Where true religion calls for the growth and fulfillment of the human spirit the false religion suppresses and enslaves the individual.

Where true religion calls for risk and the spirit of adventure, the false religion is based on fear and suspicion. Most of all, **where the true religion embraces and forgives the sinner, the false religion accuses and blames the sinner.**

I'm sorry, but it's impossible to read those words without making a connection between what Longenecker calls false religion and much of the political rhetoric espoused by some of the candidates running for president of the United States – or is it of the Roman Empire? Both reflect the 'normalcy of civilization.'

When Holy Week unfolds as it should, it isn't only about the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. If entered into fully, it is also a story about our lives. **Holy Week is about those intrusions of the Sacred Presence of God into our consciousness. It is my hope that each one of us leave here this day more attuned to how God, whether from without or from within, is intruding into your life, and into the life of this congregation.**

I hope to see you on Thursday and Friday for the continuation of Jesus' story, and our story. That way next Sunday, Easter Sunday, can indeed be a celebration of transformation and new life.

Amen.

Resources:

"The Quintessential Pilgrim" by the Rev. Dr. Hugh L. Eichelberger (PCUSA). Day 1/EMC, Inc. www.day1.net
 Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week*, cited in *Bible Workbench* resources for April 5, 2009.