

## **Sermon for Palm/Passion Sunday**

**March 28, 2021; Church of the Ascension, Chicago.**

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*“Morning by morning the Lord God wakens me--wakens my ear to listen . . . .” Isa 50:6*

As I try and support student chaplains to develop pastoral relationships with hospital patients, I impress upon them the importance of creating a space for the patient to share their story of suffering and invite the Chaplain to empathically listen to that story.

Initially student chaplains can have a tendency to talk a lot, instead of creating a space for patient to share their lament. Learning to listen well can be a vulnerable experience for the chaplain and for the patient, since the patient’s suffering can often connect the chaplain to their own.

The poet Spencer Reece says that “listening in this particular way “can be a memorable form of love”.

It takes special intention to really listen. And like the chaplain with the patient, our deep listening of the Gospel story this morning also invites us into a particular vulnerability.

Today our Liturgy invites us to listen, and let into our hearts and minds, the images and symbols of the Palm, and the Passion, as a way of discovering the truth about ourselves, and about God.

These narratives in Scripture are the only parts of the Gospel materials that were actually written as a long and continuous story. Interestingly, they were specifically written to be listened to by Christians while attending worship.

There is also something else of importance. The gathered crowd had not the slightest idea that they were doing anything extraordinary, and that the murder of God, in the death of a particular human being, was actually happening before their very eyes. Ignorance abounded. “Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do”.

But, I think, even more extraordinary, is that we, the contemporary audience to this story, DO know what the original participants did not. You and I, along with those early Christians who first read the Gospel accounts, do know the tragedy that took place.

Today’s liturgy, with its dramatic potential to invite us in, helps us experience the profound significance of these human actions.

We, unlike the crowd, do know the part that broken humanity plays in these and other human events. We listen to this deeply human story, a story that reveals our capacity for evil, as much as it reveals God’s love, compassion, and grace.

As we listen to these stories, and especially as we experience them liturgically, we are undertaking exactly what the Gospel writers want us to be doing. In each scene, we are provoked to confront our own involvement.

Our affinity with its cast of characters, gives our lives the gospel-focus that all liturgical celebrations are meant to create for us – the recognition of our need for reconciliation and forgive-ness, and God’s acceptance of us.

You see, the Palm and Passion stories are written to overwhelm us. We are meant to be overtaken by these events, like the disciples themselves, as our own culpability becomes more and more apparent to us, caught up as we become in this human and Divine drama.

Our Liturgy invites us into this kind of deep listening, the kind our chaplain friend must learn to do, to be empathic listeners, in the knowledge that there is nothing for us to do, nothing to fix. We can only experience these events vicariously through their cast of characters.

I strongly believe it is this simple invitation to really listen to the story and allow ourselves to be taken up by the events, that we can begin to discern our need for God's grace in the midst of these human actions. It is in our deep listening that we recognize "we have no power to help ourselves", and of our human potential for a crime like this. (Pause)

As we listen to the Gospel stories today, we can also begin to sense that something even more is happening here. Yes, we are agents, players in this story, but so too is God, who through his agency, his self-giving, and in the transformation of these events, offers something that we cannot provide for ourselves – a blessing perhaps, or even a kind of rescue?

But there is no rescue, at least none that sets aside our humanity.

There is no rescue from historical necessities, no rescue from our humanity in the world. The suffering that happened to Jesus and his disciples, because of human brokenness, happens to all of us. We simply just need to read the psalms to know this.

In discerning God's redemptive involvement in these events, a rescue is not what is promised. What is promised is a new creation, a new humanity, a humanity that integrates our broken nature into God's redemptive plan.

The mysterious truth of the Cross is that our human nature is joined with God and in that joining God embraces and transcends the death we all must experience.

The truth of the Christian Way is neither the obliteration of suffering and death, nor the negation of human nature, but the creation of a new humanity, a new world, a new kingdom, where "the poor are blessed; the meek inherit; and the hungry are satisfied; and a new kingdom is inaugurated. The Cross is God's own new act of creation, that invites our response and our conversion.

Can we avoid a guilt-filled and fearful immobility, and respond with the hope of our own transformation and in the faith that God in Christ has overcome the world?

We can, through the grace given us in community, and in the nourishment of the sacraments, play our redemptive part in this drama, by deciding to be a member of this new kingdom. In our Liturgy this morning, we entered this challenge through our imaginations, placing ourselves in the midst of the joyous and the crucifying crowd. Our Liturgy intentionally placed us in this imaginative project, as a way of inviting us to think (and to feel) our way through the existential challenge of human brokenness and suffering. (Pause)

This same deep listening is set before us as we look forward to the coming liturgies of this Holy Week, helping us to enter into the great redemptive plan God daily sets before us.

One person has said that the best way to "think through" the existential challenge of suffering is with a poem, "because poems do not think through the challenge of suffering, so much as undergo that challenge". (*Joy, A Collection of Poems, Ed. Christian Wiman*).

Another person (*Spence Reece*) has said that poems are "spiritual suitcases", by which I think he meant that if we open them up, they sometimes contain exactly what we need for the spiritual journey set before us.

We can receive healing by thinking and feeling our way through the suffering that is ours to live. That there IS MEANING in suffering is the point of today's Gospel Story, a story that in our own individual circumstance, we all undergo as we journey through life. And so, in hopes that our poetic imaginations might be of assistance in the existential life we all live, I want to conclude with a brief fragment of a poem by Dorothy Sayers, an Anglican poet, novelist and theologian, in the hope that you may hear in it, a hint of the risen life to come.

*“He, when he hung upon the fatal tree, / Felt all the passion of the world pierce through him, . . . and from the griefs of time / Wrought out the splendor of His eternity. / There is no waste with God; he cancels nothing / But redeems all.”*