**Reflection for Palm Sunday 2014**

**St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA**

**By Rachel Wildman, seminarian**

*36 “Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, ‘Sit here while I go over there and pray.’ 37He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. 38Then he said to them, ‘I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.” (Matthew 26:36-38)*

As a chaplain intern last summer I was assigned to be the primary chaplain covering the Emergency Department. Towards the middle of the summer, I arrived at the ED to do my daily rounds. As always, I asked at the nurses’ station if there was anyone they felt I should or should not check in on, and for the first time all summer, they paused, and said “you know, I think the woman in 4 would really like a visit.” I was thrilled. After feeling awkward and in-the-way all summer, this was it—I was going to be useful! I headed into room 4 and was met with a very elderly-looking woman, Evelyn, moaning and crying out, writhing in her bed. “Oh—you—you there—I need to go to the bathroom. Take me to the bathroom—please. I need to go to the bathroom. It hurts. It hurts.” She continued moaning, and I, determined to be useful, headed back to the nurses’ station to find her nurse and get someone to take her to the bathroom. Five minutes later, I was back in her room, having learned that she was actually not able to go to the bathroom, even though she felt like she had to, because she had not had anything to eat for 4 days, nor anything to drink, not even one drop, for 2 days. She was described to me as a “failure-to-thrive”…appearing to be well into her 80’s, she was actually only in her early 60’s, but was deeply depressed, dropped off by her husband who left, not able to watch her “fail” any longer. I quickly realized that all I could do was to be with her--Simply be with her. I took her hand, and grasped it firmly. She grasped back. She did not stop yelling out, she did not stop writhing, she did not agree to take water or food, she continued to attempt to pull the IV out of her arm. I could NOT take her pain away. There was NOTHING I could do, except to witness her pain-- entirely the product of a depression so deep that she stopped eating and drinking—born of hopelessness. I could not even give her hope. All I could do was follow Jesus’ request and “remain with her and stay awake.” I prayed *for* her, silently. She did not want me to pray *with* her. And at some point, that got too difficult for me, as my own sense of helplessness grew, so I remained there and stayed awake, while Jesus prayed. I sat with her for 3 hours.

Despite how my time with Evelyn began, with me feeling awkward and ineffective, as the time with her wore on, I came to understand the importance of my being with her—and not just my presence with her, sitting by her side, but my being fully present *to* her, and *to* her suffering. The nursing staff needed to know that Evelyn was not alone. Her husband, when he arrived a day later, needed to know that Evelyn had not been alone. And Evelyn, so ashamed of her inability to pull herself out of her depression, made evident by the content of some of her wails and laments, needed to know that she was still worthy of being with—that her depression and self-destruction had not alienated her from all human relationship. In our culture, suffering is so very often a shaming event—physical suffering is cause to shame one for not taking better care of themselves, emotional suffering to shame one for being too weak. However, in the act of one person being immediately present to another’s suffering, the shame of suffering is momentarily dissolved. The mystical power of that dissolution of shame reverberated in my own soul, across the ED, and I like to imagine, beyond.

Now, I had never met Evelyn before that day, which made it considerably easier for me to stare her suffering in the face and witness it. For me, like for her husband, it is much harder to do that with the people I know well and love. My husband has had to tell me on countless occasions, “Stop—you cannot fix this...Please, just listen to me”—when my urge to fix has been so great that I have not even let him finish telling me what is wrong before I interrupt to offer solutions. Or, alternatively, when the problem seems far too great for me to fix it, and I am tempted to avoid the suffering altogether—the hungry person that, on painfully many occasions, prompts me to cross the street. But, this is what Jesus continues to ask of us—to simply remain here, and stay awake—to stay awake to the suffering of those around us—to not avoid it by jumping in to fix it, or by falling asleep so we don’t have to see it.

I wonder whether this is a part of our call during Holy Week—to bear witness to Jesus’ suffering—God’s suffering. This passage is, perhaps, the passage where Jesus’ humanity is most clearly depicted. Jesus, acknowledging his own fear, his desire to be spared what would come. And what he asks of his disciples, and of us, is not that they go and fix it, but that they simply remain with him, and stay awake. Jesus asks that they be willing to take on the discomfort of witnessing his suffering, and hold him in it. Jesus’ humanity is so full, so real, so complete that even he, God incarnate, seeks companionship, support, and love in his own suffering.

The call from Jesus to be present to suffering, I strongly believe, is not to glorify suffering—to hold it up as something to emulate—an end in itself. I was not watching Evelyn become more spiritually pure through her physical pain and emotional and spiritual anguish. Rather, the call from Jesus is, to me, a call to live ever more deeply into our baptismal vows—to seek and serve Christ in all persons, and to respect the dignity of every human being. It is a call into deeper relationship with each other and with God. The gift given to someone of being fully present to their reality, even if that reality is harshly painful, is an act of grace. It is to affirm visibly what is always true—that God is present. It is to uphold another’s suffering as grievous, but not shameful. To be fully present to another’s suffering is to say “I will not avert my eyes.” It is to affirm the other person’s dignity as God’s own child. For in the suffering of each of us, is the suffering of God, and as we will learn again this Holy Week, the suffering of God, no matter how it is hoped by those who perpetrate it, will not be a shaming experience.

So, this Holy Week, let us practice being fully present to God’s own suffering—and in that act, proclaim the Gospel message, itself—that God is always among us, even in our suffering, and that each of us in every moment is worthy of God’s transforming, empowering gaze. AMEN.