“Break the Cycle”

A Sermon for Palm/Passion Sunday, 2020

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As most of you know, I grew up in the Northeast and spent most of my 20’s in Pennyslvania. So, when we moved to New Orleans, I was excited to have left winter behind. What I found, though, is that the reduction of 4 seasons to just two—spring and summer—left me unmoored. The cycle of 4 seasons proved actually quite critical to how I processed time, to my connection to the earth, and to my finding joy and newness even when some aspects of my life seemed hopelessly stagnant. It is no wonder that I spent the first half of my adult career life in academia, with its seasons of the academic calendar, and will now spend the second half in the church, with its liturgical seasons.

One of the aspects of our COVID-19 lockdown has been a sense that my life is now somehow seasonless, with no idea of how long that will last. Of course there are still church seasons and Earth’s seasons, but lockdown has made those less accessible to me, and I find that all the days not only of a given week, but also of the imagined months ahead, seem to run together…life, though it has slowed in some ways that I am finding renewing, has also seemed to take on a changeless qaulity. David was singing “The Song that Never Ends” the other day…and it has stuck with me, a fitting metaphor for where I am in my COVID-19 experience.

It is caught in this sense of changelessness that I meditated witih Matthew’s account of the Passion of Jesus, which we just experienced. It is in this sense of changelessness that I sat inside the story of our Messiah—God’s own Son—seemingly not defeating the oppressive power structure of his day, but instead, marching toward his gruesome death on the cross. “The Song that Never Ends” seems to echo across all time—oppression and contempt and isolation and even violence, suffering and death—the Songs that never end, even when God, incarnate, is physically walking the face of the earth.

Jesus’ suffering and death are referred to as the Passion not because our hearing of it, or his experience of it, is deeply emotional. Rather, it is referred to as the Passion because of Jesus’ apparent passivity in the midst of his own betrayal, trial, and death. The taunts of Jesus’ mockers, goading him to save himself, echo in our minds, too.

Jesus’ apparent passivity—turning the other cheek even to death—seems even more troubling in Matthew’s account of the Passion, specifically, where it is paired with a more emphatic focus on Jesus’ suffering and death as fulfilling the scriptures. Jesus, himself, says: “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?”

But, Jesus had appealed to his father…twice in the garden while praying, he asked God to remove this cup from him, unless it be God’s will…He still ends up crucified. So, we are left not only with Jesus’ Passion as a fulfillment of the scriptures, but also as a fulfillment of God’s own will in that present moment.

In the midst of the current chaos, loss, death, and helplessness of coronavirus, in the midst of the apparent stagnation of our individual and common life, Matthew’s Passion and the potential that Jesus was just a passive puppet, following God’s script, a script that required him to die a painful, shaming, gruesome death, is, for me, a penetrating beginning to Holy Week.

PAUSE

In actuality, though, the Gospel—the Good News—as a passive Jesus on a pre-ordained collision course to death is not at all how Matthew’s community understood it, or desired to present it.

Although Matthew’s Gospel talks repeatedly of the need for Jesus to fulfill the scriptures, it is not arguing that puppet Jesus was following some divine script…rather, Matthew’s Gospel—the Good News that Matthew’s community believed and experienced--was that Jesus was following the will of God to absorb all violence and suffering…such that the cycle of violence comes to an end. Jesus’ apparent passivity was, in fact, a very active stance, that likely took all the emotional and spiritual strength he had, to remain centered in himself as God’s physical manifestation of radical, disrupting, love in the world.

What Matthew’s community experienced and wanted to proclaim as Good News is that Jesus’ birth, life, death, *and* resurrection reveal that the will of God is to uncover and to break cycles of harm, of shame, of illness, of isolation, of oppression…even, of death. To absorb it all so that we are free to claim the new life that its absence leaves behind.

The jarring experience of Matthew’s Passion is, for me, a Holy Week call for us to become ever more present and aware of the many cycles of harm that the coronavirus pandemic has brought into brighter light. To be present to the many different cycles of suffering and violence that are revealed with a new clarity now, and the too often inaccurate assumptions and deceptive tropes we bring to explain them.

This particular Holy Week in this particular time has a special power to reveal the cyclic disparities rampant in our common life—health disparities, educational disparities, income disparities, race disparities. The deaths and loss of this pandemic, just like Jesus’ death, have shed new light on painful truths. So, may we spend this Holy Week as Christ’s eyes and ears…watching and listening for the systems and cycles of marginalization and suffering which so desperately need God’s disrupting, absorbing love.

For, just as Jesus’ death did, the Good News is that the deaths and losses we face now will also bring divine openings to end these cycles of violence and suffering—to absorb pain—to absorb greed—to absorb indiferrence. We, as the body of Christ *now*, will be given opportunities to reveal the ability of God’s creative, transforming, reconciling love to absorb all suffering and begin cycles of abundance…cycles of health and freedom…cycles of joy and awe. For, there *is* no Song that Never Ends except the Song of Divine Love…Easter awaits us…resurrection awaits us…new life awaits us…God’s abundant, absorbing, miraculous love awaits us…Thanks be to God.

AMEN.