

Palm / Passion Sunday
March 20, 2016

"Let His Be Your Walk"
by Mary Anne Biggs

Philippians 2:5-11 ~ Luke 19:28-40

Today is designated as Palm Sunday *and* Passion Sunday ... two seemingly contrasting events. Palm Sunday ... the story of a group of hopeful people accompanying and heralding a new Messiah as he entered Jerusalem ... and Passion Sunday ... the difficult and demoralizing story of that same messiah ... now mostly deserted by his followers ... walking the narrow, painful path to the cross.

As most of you know, I grew up in the Catholic Church, where there is no such thing as Palm /Passion Sunday. In the Catholic Church there is *no* danger of merrily joining Jesus on the ride into Jerusalem with shouts of hosanna and then waking the next Sunday to his glorious resurrection. In the Catholic church it is Palm Sunday and Passion *week* ... a week filled with the pathos of the Last Supper and the betrayal in the garden ... a week filled with the agonizing stations of the cross ... a week filled with the horrific remembrance of the crucifixion ... a week filled with a lonely and desolate Saturday vigil ... and then and *only* then ... after all of that was said and done ... a joyous celebration of the risen Christ.

When I was in kindergarten I had a part in the Easter pageant at my church. I was just part of the big crowd that was supposed to be calling for Pilate to release Barabbas instead of Jesus. I was all fired up for my acting debut and was the first to call out in a loud voice ... "Give us Barabbas!" Well, that is what I was supposed to say ... unfortunately I bellowed, "Give us the rabbit!" Come on ... it was Easter ... I was five!

But I was determined to redeem myself when I my third grade class enacted the Passion play. Of course I wanted to play the lead, but Larry Waterman got the part of Jesus. Once again I was relegated to the role of one of the women huddling together in the background. Needless to say, there is only so much huddling a person could do ... so as I huddled there I rewrote the script in my mind, because I knew what was coming and I couldn't stand the ending. I fantasized myself as a powerful Roman warrior princess, and saw myself storming up to the hill of Golgotha in my chariot ... rescuing Jesus from the Cross ... driving him away and nursing him back to health in my palatial home. Wouldn't that be a better ending? And I have often wondered, despite the juvenile nature of my fantasy, why the story of Jesus had to turn out the way it did. Why couldn't there be a different ending? What would it have taken to make the story come out differently?

Well, for starters ... the people with the power to make the choices ... those choices that required the death of Jesus on the cross ... would have had to allow their hearts and minds to be radically changed. Judas would have needed a heart more like John's. Rather than trying to force Jesus'

hand to bring about a miraculous but violent revolt against the Roman overlords ... he would have needed to trust that Jesus' way was the best, whatever it was.

Herod and his wife Herodias would have had to listen to the preaching of John the Baptist. Theirs was not a love match ... the two of them had divorced their first spouse in order to form an unholy alliance aimed at power and prestige. They would have had to recognize this and seek to change their relationship to serve the Truth.

Annas and Caiaphas would have needed to be like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea ... they would have had to really listen to Jesus' teaching and allow God to do something new in their time. Instead they just practiced cynical politics trying to save the Jewish civilization of their time. "It is better for just one man to die, that for the nation to perish."

Pilate would have needed to be willing to be like the centurion who begged Jesus to heal his boy. He would have had to be willing to see the flaws in Roman culture and religion ... and been open to the Law and the Prophets of the people he was sent to subjugate.

But even if all of that had come to pass I believe that Jesus would not have been saved. Jesus is ... and this is the thread that binds both Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday narratives together ... Jesus is the bold innocence of God. Jesus is the radical peacefulness that shows up without the protection of any armor. Jesus is God's justice that rides into an unjust city with no sword to protect it. Jesus is bold and defenseless love. And that, of course, is why he must die.

He must die because he chose to enter the city at all rather than turn back to the silence of the desert or the more peaceful Judean countryside.

He must die because in entering that city in the way that he did, he activated the hope of the Jewish people for a king that would restore their dignity and their power. And yet he must disappoint them because he will not engage in violence to effect that restoration.

He must die because he attracted the attention of those who had the most to lose ... the religious and political authorities who needed to protect religion and politics and economics that served the few rather than the many ... and they had the violent means to carry out that protection.

He must die because defenseless and non-violent love ... love that is the mind of Christ ... rather than a mind set on domination and retaliation ... must always expect to suffer wounds and unbearable tensions in the loving ... must always be crucified in some way in order to open a new way to freedom and life.

I know all of this, and yet I still long for a rewrite. But it finally dawned on me that God *has* rewritten the ending. That's what God does in the resurrection. It's not my job, but at the same time *it is* our job, with God as our helper. On a daily basis, from now throughout Holy Week, Easter Sunday and beyond, it is our job to continue to rewrite the ending. It is our job as the church. It is our job as Christians ... in a world filled with vivid scenes where greed and violence continue to reign.

Yossi Klein Halevi grew up in Borough Park, Brooklyn, in a community of Orthodox Holocaust survivors. As a child, he was terrified whenever his route forced him to walk near a church, fearing that grasping hands might emerge from the massive doors and drag him into the basement, where priests would kidnap him and force him to become a Christian.

As an adult, Halevi went to Israel to serve in the Israeli army where he worked in a refugee camp in the Gaza Strip. It was there that while on patrol he was struck in the head by a large rock and nearly killed.

His background hardly seems one to lay the ground-work for a two-year-long attempt to understand and experience both Christianity and Islam from the inside. Yet this was the task that he set for himself. In his book entitled *At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden* he goes on what I believe is a journey of bold innocence, defenseless love and the willingness to bear unbearable tensions.

Knowing almost nothing about Christianity and Islam, and fearing or loathing what little he did know, he set out to discover whether religion ... which has served as a divisive force throughout most of Middle Eastern history ... could serve as a unifying force instead. Holding on to his Jewish faith, Halevi met Christian and Palestinian Muslim believers on their own turf and even participated in their rituals as a way of understanding where their experiences of God could bring Jews, Christians and Muslims together.

As you would expect, Halevi met many fascinating people along the way and had to overcome his own suspicions of some ... as well as others' suspicions of him in the process. What he discovered; however, is that despite the differences and the suspicions ... hope is to be found in coming back over and over again to the simple reverencing of the other's dignity before God ... doing this through countless small but costly gestures that are personal admissions that we cannot live forever in isolation, pride or unforgiveness.

Halevi writes of his time in the Holy Land even as more conflict arose: "It is precisely at times like these that the beautiful teachings of faith become either real or mere sentiment. More than ever, the goal of a spiritual life in the Holy Land is to live with an open heart at the center of unbearable tension. The best I can say is that I'm struggling, and that maintaining a painful awareness of the gap between what I've been taught ... and my inability to embody those teachings ... defines my spiritual life."

For us this morning, in all our holy lands, this is what it means to put on the mind of Christ ... the mind that dared to enter Jerusalem as the humble and defenseless king. It means walking the path of reverencing the dignity of *all* before God though it leads to the cross ... to keep an open and vulnerable heart at the center of whatever unbearable tension we are living through.

And so as we begin Holy Week ... the path that leads to Easter ... a path that takes us into the city ... to the cross ... into the tomb ... and in at least one account of the resurrection ... back into a garden. As we begin Holy Week, what I want to say to you is this ... let his walk be your walk. Let today be your humble and willing entrance into *your* city of tension and danger. You can rewrite the ending by letting your reverencing the dignity of another or "the other" before

God. Let God lead you on your path to your cross and into whatever tomblike place awaits you. The story hasn't ended. For even now the garden of resurrected life awaits us ... the place of astonishment and deliverance ... the place of the transformation of our fear and sin into wonder and gratefulness ... the place of new life where our wounds are healed. May the church be born again today... reborn today on this Palm Sunday ... in you and in me.

May we pray?

Merciful God, as we enter Holy Week turn our hearts again to Jerusalem...to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus...so that united with Christ and all the faithful, we may one day enter the city not made by human hands ... the new Jerusalem. Amen.