

“Eternal Beginning and Eternal Becoming”
Isaiah 50:4-9a
Matthew 27:11-23

The “Liturgy of the Passion” on Palm Sunday is designed to focus our attention on the suffering of Jesus. Gaining a grasp on its significance is a game-changer.

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) is a pandemic. California is under a “Shelter In Place” Order and most states have joined us. We have been asked to sacrifice for the benefit of the common good. As of 6:15am this morning, worldwide there are 1,218,126 cases, 65,841 deaths and 253,818 who have recovered.¹ Sheltering in place, wearing a face mask when in grocery stores and outside as well as practicing social distancing and proactive hygiene will prove to be lifesaving and a return to a more normal way of existence sooner than later.

As anxiety increases around human suffering, the religious have a significant contribution to make. Through our interactions with family and friends as well as in social media, we can engage the public conversation. Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest and the emerita Butman Professor of Religion at Piedmont College, writes this about engaging others about suffering, “My faith is invisible to most people, especially since I stopped wearing a clergy collar, though everything from the school holiday calendar to the greeting-card section at the drugstore supports my sense of being in the religious mainstream.”² Is your faith visible or invisible?

The texts in Isaiah 50:4-9a and Matthew 27:11-23 reveal that experiencing suffering makes our Christian faith visible.

In Isaiah 50:4-9a, we learn that servanthood is proven in and through suffering. In the text, God assures the prophet Isaiah who he is and to whom he belongs. Isaiah 50:7-9a reads,

¹Stats taken from the Worldometer an organization run by an international team of developers, researchers, and volunteers with the goal of making world statistics available in a thought-provoking and time relevant format to a wide audience around the world. Worldometer is owned by Dadax, an independent company. Worldometer has no political, governmental, or corporate affiliation.

²Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy* (New York, New York: HarperOne, 2019), 86-87.

“The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty?” We are given the same invitation as Isaiah to serve in and through suffering. God will assure you who you are and to whom you belong.

In Matthew 27:11-23, Jesus describes his own suffering travelling the road to Jerusalem and eventually the cross. What can we learn from Jesus’ suffering that can be applied to our lives today? This is the lesson. People look to a strong leader to take charge in the political arena, the business world and even in the church. Jesus not taking charge frustrated everyone. Jesus’ suffering, to those who grasped what it was about, was not the end, but the beginning. Suffering is essential for an individual’s salvation, the church’s salvation and the resulting salvation new heaven and new earth. Only in suffering, can we find the new beginning. Look at these two verses:

First, Matthew 27:11 states, “Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus said, “You say so.”

And second, Matthew 27:20 reads, “Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and have Jesus killed.”

Really? Jesus, this mild mannered, forthright, loving and humble man was that much of a threat? Yes, his strength was not in seizing kingship, but receiving it through sacrifice. Jesus was a threat to complacency and panic, because he diffused the drama caused by despair, chaos, sadness and hate.³

Today is Palm Sunday. Jesus was five days away from his death. Jesus knew the Father’s will. He was sent to love, heal, teach, confront, befriend, and die for humanity. Jesus knew he was

³In the two paragraphs of textual analysis above, I have benefited from the thinking of Kathryn Schifferdecker, Brent A. Strawn, O. Wesley Allen Jr. and Diane G. Chen as found in Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby and Carolyn J. Sharp, editors, *Connections, Year A, Volume 2* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 116-118, 118-120, 128-130 and 131-132.

God and that salvation was his to give. Salvation can be yours today. Through authentic self-reflection, you can embrace suffering and make it work for you and the common good. Again, Barbara Brown Taylor, the author of *Holy Envy* writes, “As alarming as it is to think about the impact that a single visit can have, there is a truth here that I do not want to miss: it is not what we believe that defines us, but what we do.”⁴ Your words and deeds make your faith in Jesus visible.

Receive hope, peace, joy and love during this Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. God has not abandoned you. God is with you. God has a warm relationship with you. God loves you and wants you to love others with that same warmth. Remember, a warm relationship is characterized by being empathetic, listening, caring, loving, acting and speaking with compassion. It is only when you can identify with Jesus’ suffering on the road to Jerusalem, the trial, the Garden and the cross that you are able to face suffering and experience it for your good and the common good.

Embrace suffering. Begin and become eternally alive. Exude hope, peace, joy and love when despair, chaos, sadness and hate take hold of human experience. Listen to Jesus. Experience Jesus. Show others Jesus. Amen.

This sermon was preached (Livestream due to the Coronavirus) on Palm Sunday, 05 April 2020 by the Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh in his Study at Geneva Presbyterian Church in Laguna Woods, California

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⁴Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy*, 93.