

**Palm Sunday**  
**The Sunday of the Passion**  
**Palm Sunday in the Midst of the Corvid-19 Pandemic**  
**April 5, 2020**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,  
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,  
And the power of God known in the Spirit.  
Amen.**

Today is Palm Sunday. It is also the Sunday of the Passion. On this Sunday I usually preach about Palm Sunday ... Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. However, under the dire circumstances that we find ourselves in with the Corvid-19 coronavirus pandemic, I am moved to reflect on Jesus' Passion.

In 1982 my youngest son, Christopher, was being driven home from a Boy Scout meeting by a 16 year-old who had just received his driver's license. There was an accident, and Christopher was critically injured with a traumatic head injury and broken bones on every limb of his body. While lying in a coma in the intensive care unit, Christopher's mother and I could visit him only ten minutes every two hours. After one visit to the ICU when Christopher was near death, I came out to the waiting room and just sobbed. A friend who was visiting gave me a hug and said, "Don't cry, Ted, everything is going to be alright."

All I could think was that maybe my prayers would be answered and everything would be "alright" ... sometime in the future. But, at that moment, things were not "alright." I hurt deeply, and all I wanted was for someone to hold me and let me cry.

I excused myself and went to the hospital chapel. As I entered, a colleague and friend ... another Episcopal priest ... a colleague and friend from the Raleigh area ... was leaving. He knew the about accident and had been with me the night Christopher was taken to the Emergency Room. He sat down with me as I shared news of Christopher's condition.

I told him about my friend's effort to comfort me with "Everything is going to be alright." We sat in silence for a few moments, then he pointed to a cross hanging on the wall. He said, "That bare cross is a sign of our faith. Without Jesus on the cross it is a symbol of the Resurrection." Then he pointed to a small crucifix hanging on an adjacent wall. He said, "The crucifix with Jesus on the cross is a symbol of his suffering ... and of God's suffering. Your friend wants the Resurrection, but it can only happen through the suffering and death of Jesus. Sometimes, 'only a suffering God can help.'" He then held me as my tears flowed.

My colleague had quoted from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers From Prison*; "Only a suffering God can help." Bonhoeffer also wrote: "To be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way, to cultivate some particular form of asceticism. . . but to be a

human being. It is not some religious act which makes a Christian what he is, but participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world.”

I’ve never forgotten the line my colleague shared, and I’ve been thinking about it since the coronavirus pandemic began. *“Only a suffering God can help.”*

If these were “ordinary” times, we’d be preparing to spend many hours together at St. Cyprian’s over the next few days. Today, we’d gather outside for the Blessing of the Palms, and then process into the church waving palm branches, shout “Hosanna,” and read the story of Jesus’s death and burial. On Wednesday we’d live into the devotion of the Stations of the Cross for the last time in this Lenten season. On Maundy Thursday, we’d wash each other’s feet, share a simple holy meal of bread and wine remembering the Last Supper, and we would strip our altar bare. On Good Friday, we’d do our St. Cyprian’s thing ... maybe a simple Taize service reflecting on the Passion, and then walk the labyrinth. On Holy Saturday, we’d wait, drained and tired, perhaps, but full of anticipation for Easter and its many joys.

But these aren’t ordinary times. Most of you are confined to our homes, and this church family ... along with many others ... is not gathering in person. Some of you have lost your jobs, your paychecks, your savings. Many of us are numb and disassociated, unable to process the scope of what’s really happening around the world. Some are anxious ... lonely ... terrified ... even depressed. Some of us are sick. Already one parishioner’s sister has tested positive for Corvid-19, and another parishioner’s brother-in-law is critically ill with the disease. Some of us are grieving our dead with no real way to have a funeral. Some of us ... before this pandemic is over ... may be victims of Corvid-19 and may die.

What is there to say? What does our faith offer us in perilous times like these? On this Passion Sunday, I think it offers us a core truth ... a healing truth ... a paradoxical and shocking truth: only a suffering God can help. And, a suffering God ... a crucified, broken, desolate God ... is what we have.

I know that there is much to be said, pondered, and debated about the theological meanings of the cross. What precisely happened when Jesus died? What did his crucifixion accomplish? What can we know for sure about sin, redemptive sacrifice, death, atonement, and eternity in light of Christ’s death?

These are all crucial questions, and wise, probing minds have considered them for centuries. But right now, what strikes me most is not the theology. What strikes me is the story itself, bare and unadorned. The story of betrayal, denial, and abandonment. The story of cruel, unjust trials, false accusations, and Jesus’s mysterious silence. The story of floggings. The story of thorns. The story of bloody wounds and oxygen-deprived lungs. The story of what happens when the God we want ... and think we know ... doesn’t show up. Instead, another God ... a less efficient, less aggressive, far less muscular God ... shows up instead.

The Jesus we find in this story from Matthew's Gospel is not a Jesus who presides victoriously over his own final chapter. He is a man who suffers in utter vulnerability, nakedness, and isolation. When he prays in Gethsemane, he "throws himself on the ground," and pleads for his life. His flogging at the hands of Pilate's soldiers weakens him so much that he can't bear the weight of his own cross ... Simon of Cyrene carries it for him. His last word before dying is hardly a "word" at all ... it's a howl. A wrenching cry of defeat and abandonment ... "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Embracing this shamed and suffering God ... much less following him ... is not easy. On the cross, Jesus bears the violence, the contempt, the pain, and the humiliation of the entire world and absorbs it into his own body. He declares solidarity for all time with those who are abandoned, marginalized, frightened, oppressed, imprisoned, beaten, mocked, and murdered. He takes an instrument of torture and turns it into a bizarre vehicle of hospitality and communion for all people, everywhere.

To take up a cross as Jesus does is to stand, always, in the center of the world's pain. Not just to glance in the general direction of suffering and then sidle away ... but to dwell in that pain as if it were your own. To identify ourselves wholly with those who are aching, weeping, screaming, and dying. Taking up the cross means recognizing Christ crucified in every suffering soul and body that surrounds us, and pouring our energies and our lives into alleviating that pain ... no matter what it costs.

In the context of our current pandemic, it means trusting that God is in the very midst of the loss and terror, mourning with and for us. It means accepting that we will die ... if not now then later ... and trusting that we, like Jesus, will also rise again. It means speaking back to our own trembling hearts, which so often prioritize self-protection over everything else that matters in this life. It means stepping away from the vicious cycles of denial and fear that seek to cheat death, but in fact rob us of the abundant life Jesus died to give us.

I'll be honest ... like many of you, I come to this Holy Week confused, tired, and afraid. Who knows how many deaths lie waiting around the corner? How many disappointments, sorrows, farewells, and unfinished endings we will face before we can find the joy of the Resurrection? However, if anything in the Christian story is true, then this is true as well ... our suffering God will not leave us alone. There is no death we will die ... small or big ... literal or figurative ... that Jesus will not hold in his crucified arms.

So. Welcome to Holy Week. Here we are, and here is our suffering, sorrowing, saving God. Blessed is the One who comes to die so that we will live.

Amen.