

“Stepping Forward into the Mystery”

Liturgically today is very strange. Your bulletin reads Palm Sunday but the church has also made today Passion Sunday. That is we are supposed to celebrate Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem and then in nearly the blink of an eye experience the Passion. It is like going to the scenes menu on a DVD and skipping from scene 1 to scene 5. Jesus enters Jerusalem and then all of sudden he is being arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. The apparent reason is because so many people are unable to attend church on Good Friday. So while it is odd to have the entry and crucifixion on the same day, it would also be strange to jump from the entry to resurrection without the crucifixion. So today we have had a mashup.

One way I have recommended making the transition more realistic is to follow Jesus’ journey to the cross by reading a portion of the gospel each day. That way you get to Good Friday more like Jesus did, one day at a time. I still feel that is a good idea and I heartily recommend it.

Another option is to focus on one aspect of the Passion and live with it throughout this week. You might wonder what the week was like for Jesus, his disciples, his other followers, his enemies, Pilate, the centurion, or the average person on the street. This is like what Steve Wade taught us in January when we studied the Ignatian way of living into the biblical narrative.

For example, imagine being Peter. He is the most devoted and enthusiastic of Jesus’ disciples. He is so passionate Jesus changes his name from Simon which means “to hear or listen” to Peter which means “rock.” As passionate as Peter may be, when he is faced with the possibility of being drawn into Jesus’ trial, perhaps even being tried himself; he denies even knowing Jesus. It is when he hears the rooster crow that he is overcome with remorse for his denial.

We could also imagine ourselves in the role of Mary Magdalene. This woman was cured by Jesus, and became a financial supporter of his ministry. She is a loyal follower of Jesus. She is one person at the foot of the cross in every gospel account of the crucifixion. She is often called the apostle to the apostles because she discovers the empty tomb and tells the men about it. The early male leadership of the church was so worried about how close she was to Jesus that they besmirched her name and reputation by creating a fiction that she was a prostitute.

We could also look at some of the lesser figures in the narrative, for example Simon of Cyrene. Was it just by chance that he ends up carrying the cross for Jesus or was he a follower? The writers seem to know who he is and know his name and know he had two sons named Alexander and Rufus, but that is all the Gospels tell us. Look at the Passion from their point of view. You will have a lot of latitude there.

Perhaps the least noted figure in the story of Holy Week is the donkey that Jesus rode into Jerusalem. Mary Oliver pondered the donkey and his experience of Holy Week in her poem “The Poet Thinks about the Donkey.”

On the outskirts of Jerusalem
the donkey waited.
Not especially brave, or filled with understanding,
he stood and waited.

How horses, turned out into the meadow,
leap with delight!
How doves, released from their cages,
clatter away, splashed with sunlight.
But the donkey, tied to a tree as usual, waited.
Then he let himself be led away.
Then he let the stranger mount.
Never had he seen such crowds!
And I wonder if he at all imagined what was to happen.
Still, he was what he had always been: small, dark, obedient.
I hope, finally, he felt brave.
I hope, finally, he loved the man who rode so lightly upon him,
as he lifted one dusty hoof and stepped, as he had to, forward.¹

Let us enter Holy Week as the donkey did obediently lifting one foot and stepping forward into the greatest of mysteries and the greatest of gifts.

¹ Mary Oliver, "The Poet Thinks about the Donkey" from *Thirst* [Beacon: Boston, 2006]