

“Passionate and Holy”

Every year, I am struck by the jarring juxtaposition of the two messages we receive in the readings on this Sunday. The Church calls today Passion Sunday [colon]: Palm Sunday. Yet we start today’s worship with Palm Sunday, so why does it not get top billing? Maybe it would be better if this Sunday was called Passion Week Sunday or the Sunday of Passion Week. Then I would be more comfortable with Palm Sunday coming after the colon.

Today is the first day of the week, and this week is Holy Week, which can also rightly be called Passion Week. Passion Week begins with the triumphal entry into Jerusalem when Jesus rides a donkey into the city through a multitude of onlookers who wave palm branches and strew them across the path of the donkey. Thus, today is traditionally called Palm Sunday. So, I guess we can live with this title of Passion Sunday: Palm Sunday.

But in our ‘gospel readings’ today, we jump from Palm Sunday right into Good Friday as if nothing else happened during the week. I suppose it is better than skipping the entire week to come back on Easter Day, having missed the momentous events of the week, but we are still left wondering how Jesus got from being the triumphant and hailed Messiah to a criminal being killed on a cross in five days. It feels weird, confusing, and jarring.¹

Still, I am left wondering how we get from one place to the other emotionally. How did the followers of Jesus cope in the first century? What can we learn from their reactions? How do we cope now as we attempt to live this Passion once again? Remember, as I have said before, our yearly observance of the Passion can be a remembrance or something more.

I feel that if we only observe this week as a remembrance, we are giving it short shrift and are cheating ourselves out of a lived experience. Each year, we could walk with Jesus and his followers. We can be one of his disciples or followers. We can be there with him. Does that seem like a foolish idea because we cannot be there since it happened nearly two thousand years ago? While we do not have a time machine, such a machine is not required.

We all have imaginations. We read novels, watch television shows, plays, and movies, and we are drawn into the story without realizing it. What’s more, we can watch “Romeo and Juliet” or “Saving Private Ryan” many times and still hope that it turns out differently. We have the power to put ourselves in the story.

St. Ignatius Loyola urged us to put ourselves in the story four hundred years ago. As part of his spiritual exercise called Examen, he taught us to do more than read scripture. He directed us to imagine ourselves as a character or an onlooker in the passage. The point is to get into the story and feel what that character feels, see what that character sees, feel their feelings, and experience the outcome. It is a challenge,

¹There is a new service this year that attempts to help us overcome that by sending messages throughout holy Week, helping us move through the week with Jesus and his disciples. I do not know how it will work, but I have signed up for it, and I encourage you to do so as well. It may not be perfect, but it is a worthwhile experiment. [Reference to the app](#)

but with some practice, we can become more adept at it. What this practice does is help reveal the more intimate aspects of the passage. It also makes it more real for us. We are no longer separated from the story by time and circumstance. We are active in it. It becomes our story.

I have been wondering how Jesus' disciples experienced what we call Holy Week. The triumphal entry might have been exhilarating, but shouldn't Jesus' predictions of his own death have been in the back of their minds? Were they escorting him like a bodyguard up to Jerusalem, or were they so caught up in the excitement that they had forgotten that prediction? If so, did it come back to them that night as they rested in Bethany just outside of Jerusalem? What about the next day when Jesus purged the Temple from the money changers and animal sellers? Did that seem like a prelude to death, or was it so confusing because those people were needed in the temple? Did they understand Jesus wanted them out because they were taking advantage of the Passover pilgrims with high fees and prices?

As the week wore on, did Jesus' predictions become more inevitable? Or was it an up and down experience where hope might arrive only to be squashed by something else? When did they finally realize it was all over and that Jesus' prediction was coming true? Was it at the Last Supper, or in the Garden of Gethsemane, or during the trial, or with Pilate, or on the walk to Golgotha, or when he was nailed to the cross? It seems that they gave up hope after that because they fled.

How do we act and feel as we watch someone we love approach death? Don't we pray, bargain, look for hopeful signs, and tell stories of how others rebounded or recovered? We are seldom ready to accept the inevitability of death. We are also unwilling to accept that death has happened. I remember seeing the back of a head in a crowd and thinking it was the head of a recently dead friend. I was not looking for him, but I was ready to believe he was still among the living for a split second.

That is the way it should be this Passion Week. Let us put ourselves into the Gospel narrative and suffer with the disciples, his friends, and his family. Let us get as deeply into the story as we can manage. It could be uncomfortable, maybe even painful. I think that might be the only way we can truly understand the level of sacrifice that the first followers made. It is the only way that we can understand the devastation, befuddlement, shock, and hope that each one felt. Not just as individual emotions and thoughts, but thoughts and emotions colliding and swirling within them.

I think it is hard to accept the miracle of Easter any other way. Otherwise, we are too distant from it. It is a nice story we hear once a year. But because it is a miracle that requires pain and death, it does not get the traction in the culture or even in the church as Christmas. Churchy folk talk about two-timers and C & Es, i.e., those who come to church only twice a year. However, there are lots more Cs than Es. Resurrection, the theological basis of our religion, is not as much fun as Christmas.

Dig into Passion Week. Look for the holy in the pain. Find encouragement in the stress. Realize that when we hope in God, we are trusting and not just wishing. Forge on to Resurrection even when you do not know how or when it will come. Trusting in God is what Holy Week is about. It is not a slogan on a coin, it is absolute trust that God is worth betting your life on.