

“I Say a Little Prayer”

At the risk of stating the obvious, people all around are worried. We are worried about the novel coronavirus, and its unchecked transmission around the globe. It is a tough bug and presently there is no vaccine to prevent it or reliable drug regimen to treat it. We are also concerned because the news about the virus seems to be changing hourly, and certainly daily. Are we to wear masks or not? Are we to stay home completely isolated or can we go to work and the supermarket? Where will help come from? It is so confusing that it feels like we should isolate even more than we are required.

When I hear the Passion narrative I imagine that Jesus and his disciples, not just the twelve, but the larger circle of women and men had to have similar feelings during what we call Holy Week. We know how it all turns out, but they did not. As they went up to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday the mood must have been joyful. They were amongst crowds of Jews headed up to Jerusalem for the Passover. As they get close to the gates of the city the crowds get denser and the murmur of excitement surrounds them. The people are saying that the prophet from Galilee is on his way. He is recognized within the crowd and a donkey is brought for him to mount. The people throw branches from trees, palms, and their cloaks and scarves on the ground before him. He enters Jerusalem like a conquering hero or liberator; a new Messiah, in the mold of David, the greatest of Israelite kings. The disciples were part of his entourage and basked in the glow that surrounded Jesus.

Next Jesus goes up to the Temple Mount. It was a huge expanse of at least eleven acres. In one portion of the outer precincts of the Temple Jesus finds people selling animals for sacrifice and changing foreign money into Temple Shekels. These are necessary services if one is to offer a sacrifice or make an offering. Yet, Jesus begins turning over the tables and driving these vendors out. If I were one of Jesus' disciples I would have been freaked out. I would never have seen Jesus so angry or violent. I would not understand his fury at the people providing necessary services. The glory of the triumphal entry is a stark contrast to this display.

After this Jesus will leave the city to go to the home of Martha and Mary in Bethany; a town very close to Jerusalem. It was probably a good idea to get out of town, because his actions on the Temple Mount would have caused a stir. Stirrings are what the Temple leaders and the Roman Governor do not like. The crowds are only going to get larger as we get closer to the Passover. Unrest and anxiety could cause the Romans to come down hard on the worshipers and the Temple leaders who want to keep control over the people during the holy days. Unbeknownst to the disciples the Temple leadership starts to plan how to rein in this excitement.

During their time in Bethany Jesus is teaching the disciples in parables. Some of the parables are troubling because they speak of an end time. He is not talking about triumph. He is not talking about Messiahs in the tradition of King David. He is talking about the end of the world. He is talking about his own death. Whether he speaks in metaphor or directly it had to be troubling.

The night before they return to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration, something odd happens. A woman, who is not identified in Matthew's Gospel, comes into the house where Jesus is eating and anoints him with precious oil. This enrages the disciples who think the oil should have been sold and the money given to the poor.

Jesus tells them she has anointed him for burial. Once again he is talking about dying. There is no reason Jesus should think he is marked for imminent death in the disciples' minds.

Then comes the Passover meal that we call the Last Supper, where Jesus speaks of being betrayed to the Romans. They later head to the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus prays and the disciples sleep. It is there he is arrested and the downward spiral begins that puts Jesus on the cross, and the disciples left confused, frightened, and alone.

These last few weeks have been as confused as those of Holy Week, and we do not know how it will turn out. The disciples did not know how Holy Week would turn out. Indeed, they did not even realize it was a Holy Week in the way that we think of it today. All they knew was that in as little as six days their leader, teacher, and Messiah went from being celebrated, to being betrayed by one of his own inner circle, to being tried and brutally killed.

Their answer was to isolate. They hid together in a room with the windows shuttered. Unlike us they did not have computer games, podcasts, videos, books, or even homework. They could have driven themselves mad with wondering about the terrors that were to befall them and their friends. Instead, they prayed.

We know that prayer and meditation are scientifically proven to calm our minds and our hearts. While few of us have the stamina for unending prayer, we can pray throughout the day. We can say a little prayer as we awaken, another little prayer in thanks for breakfast, another during the morning as we marvel at the flowers or the clouds, and so forth. We can say a prayer of thanks, a prayer of intercession for the ill, a prayer of encouragement for frontline workers, a prayer for those who are laid off, a prayer for the dying, a prayer for decision-makers, a prayer for grocery workers, pharmacy workers, utility workers, truckers, and others who are still on the job making sure we get what we need to stay at home safely, a prayer of thanksgiving the we have homes in which to shelter and family and friends who check in on us, and so much more. It is quite feasible to pray without ceasing when we realize all that we can be grateful for and all who are depending on the support of our prayers. Our prayers do not have to be elaborate, just heartfelt.

Like the disciples we will get through this. We will come out on the other side when the meaning of Easter, not just the events of it, will start to make sense. We will find a way to live more healthfully and with care for each other. We can come together, but it requires more than passing the time binging on food and entertainment until this pandemic is passed. It requires that we actively take part in the remaking of ourselves and our world through prayer, selflessness, and an attitude of peace. Let us come together in prayer that surrounds the globe with the murmurings of our hearts in love for the stranger, family, enemies, friends, and outsiders—the ones who are close and the ones who are far away. The world needs our deep and faithful prayers as surely as you and I need air to breathe and water to drink. Pray like you have never prayed before. You will be transformed by your prayers and the world will be, too.