

THE
Christian
CENTURY

PALM SUNDAY, HOLY WEEK, & EASTER

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GUIDE FOR REFLECTION
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Palm Sunday isn't just a happy parade

Triumphal entries have a certain formula. Jesus does it all wrong.

CHURCHES STILL HOLD Holy Week services, but attendance has dropped. Many worshipers don't attend between Palm Sunday and Easter—causing some church leaders to worry that the week can devolve into triumphalism, the parade at its beginning predictably leading to an empty tomb at its end. Many churches now shorten or even omit Palm Sunday celebrations, choosing instead to observe Passion Sunday.

While there is merit to hearing the whole story of Jesus' Passion on a single Sunday, Palm Sunday itself is more than just a happy parade. This triumphal entry of Jesus is not like the typical triumphal entries of empire, nor does it yield the same result. The careful preacher may, with the Palm Sunday story alone, lift up a dissonance present throughout Jesus' Passion, made complete at Easter dawn.

In their book *The Last Week*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan contrast Jesus' triumphal entry with Pontius Pilate's. A present-day audience has other examples of triumphal entries from empires closer to home. The Nazis entering Paris, the obligatory May Day parades in communist countries, North Korean military displays, and white nationalists' public rallies fit the same bill.

The trappings of these triumphal entries are well known. The latest in military machinery is on display, whether it be horses and chariots or missiles, tanks, and large-capacity rifles. The people respond with accolades, whether because they are paid in denarii and circus games or because they are threatened by their party leader and the secret police. The leader is an undisputed strongman. Whether he be Pilate or Caesar, Hitler or Kim Jong-un, his face—and it is always a *he*—is known throughout the land. He uses his parade to bolster his own power and position and that of a select ruling class. The religious establishment quickly falls in line. The triumphal entry displays the might of empire, simultaneously encouraging the few in power while frightening the masses into subservience.

Jesus does it all wrong. Instead of entering Jerusalem on a tank, Jesus uses a tractor. Matthew 21:1–11, perhaps misreading the poetry of the Septuagint, has Jesus ride into Jerusalem on not one but two animals, both a donkey and a colt. Neither an army nor the rich and famous accompany Jesus on his march. Instead his disciples, a ragtag group of fishermen, common folk, and at least one disreputable tax collector, make up the entourage.

The crowds themselves may not even be from Jerusalem. These are, perhaps, the very people Jesus healed and fed, country folk too desperate to wait at home for help and too poor to buy their own lunch. Waving palm branches and throwing down their cloaks, they make an unscripted celebration. There's no goose-stepping here, no coordinated show of gratitude with ribbons or cards. According to Matthew, the people of Jerusalem don't even know who Jesus is. There are no marble busts of this messiah, no propaganda posters or laudatory TV interviews. Jesus is an unknown.

Is it any wonder that later in this chapter, religious officials will question Jesus' authority, eventually seeking to have him arrested? The establishment fears Jesus and the masses shout his praise—it's a reversal of the whole point of a triumphal entry.

But Jesus isn't the only one. Matthew is keen to connect Jesus to Hebrew scripture. The quotation in our Gospel reading is an amalgamation of messianic prophecies from Isaiah and Zechariah. The king who would save Jerusalem comes not in a show of might but humbly. This image of the king on a donkey evokes other unlikely heroes of Judaism: younger sons, barren women, foreigners. Jesus' humility calls to mind his ancestor David, a shepherd boy who put all his trust in God and became king. The rise of ones like this is so unlikely it can only be interpreted as an act of God. The crowds cry out praise and bless the one who comes in God's name.

There are contemporary examples of these alternative triumphal entries, too. Martin Luther King Jr. led the people on foot to Washington, D.C. Mahatma Gandhi wore a lungi on the Salt March in India. Greta Thunberg, a mere teenager, stood before the UN with her hair in braids. The masked protesters continue their struggle in the streets of Hong Kong. They are joined by countless others around the world whose names and faces are not known by history. Suffragists seeking the vote, labor organizers demanding worker rights, indigenous people standing up for their native lands, schoolchildren protesting gun violence, women gathered to call for change. They follow in Jesus' path knowing full well that the accolades they hear can, and often do, devolve into mockery and violence.

After all, these alternative triumphal entries threaten the status quo. John the Baptist was martyred, as were most of Jesus' disciples. Gandhi and King were assassinated. Current protest

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leaders face ridicule and worse. While violence need not be inevitable, the Palm Sunday parade and all its successors boldly proclaim that humble heroes know the whole Passion story from start to finish and continue their work anyway.

Hosanna means “save us,” and there are people who need to be saved even now, even if it costs something. There are some things that are worth dying for. “Blessed be the one who comes

in the name of the Lord.” For those who do the work of God there are unexpected blessings: hope when all seems hopeless, peace beyond all understanding, love beyond measure, life beyond death.

In other words, the parade at the beginning does indeed lead to an empty tomb at the end. It’s a different kind of triumphal entry, but one more lasting and more sure. 

FOR DISCUSSION

In your own words, describe the scene in Matthew 21:6–11. How does Jesus look? How does the crowd look? What does the crowd say? How does the scene you see in this passage compare to Katie Hines-Shah’s description in the article?

Hines-Shah suggests actions by Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, and Greta Thunberg as examples of “alternative triumphal entries.” Do you agree? Why or why not? What contemporary parallels do you see to what Jesus does in this story?

Even if you can’t gather with other Christians today, you can remember Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. Play a favorite hymn or worship song. Shout, “Hosanna!” and wave something to symbolize a palm.

A quick turn of events

How does a crowd turn from shouts of joy to cries of murder in such a short span?

AT DUSK on July 1, 1985, I was sitting among the small crowd of baseball fans at Philadelphia’s Veterans Stadium, waiting for the start of a Phillies-Cubs matchup, when longtime Phillies third baseman Mike Schmidt took the field wearing a long curly wig and sunglasses. A roar of laughter rose up from the crowd, in appreciation of Schmidt’s effort to transform the attitude of the fans, who had been battling with Schmidt all season.

Schmidt won the World Series pennant for the Phillies in 1980, but he lost it for them in 1983. By midseason in 1985, the animosity between the crowd and the ballplayer had been stoked by the crowd’s jeers—and by Schmidt’s interviews, in which he described fans with words like *uncontrollable* and *mob scene*. For a few minutes that night, the crowd roared with laughter in approval and appreciation and solidarity. But nine

innings later, the mood had darkened. As the aging slugger struck out with two on and two out, the hollow stadium rang only with bitter boos. I confess that I booed along with the rest of the crowd.

How did we turn from laughing to heckling in just a few hours? How does a crowd turn from shouts of joy and welcome to cries of murder in the span of a few chapters of scripture, a few days in the life of Jesus, an hour-long worship service?

In my tradition, many churches begin the Palm/Passion service with the reading of Jesus’ hopeful entry into Jerusalem (this year, Matthew 21:1–11). We hear the people call out “Hosanna, save us” to the one who they believe will rescue them from their bondage and misery. We wave palm fronds and sing “All Glory, Laud and Honor” as we process into the sanctuary in celebration of the arrival of the king of salvation.

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And then, in the middle of the service, we participate in the dramatic reading of the extended Passion story (Matthew 26:14–27:66). The same mouths that shouted out their need for healing and salvation now call on the authorities to crucify Jesus. Each year, I experience anew the shock of how fickle the Jerusalem crowd is—a crowd of which I am a part. The memory of that baseball game keeps me humble, keeps me from claiming that I would somehow have behaved better than the hoi polloi of the holy city.

It also reminds me of what accounts for that dramatic and brutal shift: bitter, bone-chilling disappointment and misapprehension.

When the people welcome Jesus through the city gates, they are looking for a winner. Palm branches were used to welcome victors in war, military heroes who had saved the Jewish people from their enemies. The people wave palm branches and call out “Hosanna” because they anticipate that Jesus will save them from Roman occupation. But the would-be “king of the Jews” doesn’t act very kingly. He allows himself to be arrested, to be hung up on wood like a common criminal. When the crowds realize that Jesus isn’t the kind of hero they expected, they turn on him. Disappointment turns to rage.

What are our expectations about how God saves? Do we set ourselves up for disappointment because we confuse modes of human victory with God’s saving grace? The core revelation of Palm/Passion Sunday is this: God doesn’t save in the ways we might expect. God doesn’t rule the way humans do. God domi-

nates with love, not violence. God overpowers through sacrifice, not by taking away. God wins by suffering, not humiliating—suffering and aligning God’s self with those who suffer.

At a parish where I used to work, a church member and friend was diagnosed with an aggressive form of incurable cancer. As Ellen came to terms with dying, she decided to write down the lessons she was learning. In the early stages of her illness, Ellen had focused on praying for a cure. In the end, she expressed her daily gratitude for God’s ongoing presence as the cancer took over her body. She had some advice for those of us who try to control God’s saving action through our expectations: develop clear intentions of what you want out of life, but don’t be attached to the outcome. Baseball fans can expect base hits and home runs from their heroes. But it doesn’t work that way with God’s salvation.

The Palm/Passion readings force us to confront our own misapprehensions about God’s rule. Each year I am reminded that through the cross God brings salvation and hope deep into the midst of common suffering. And I realize that it is people like me—part of the crowd—whom God forgives for our false expectations and then turns into instruments of salvation and hope. At the end of our reading, Christ dies. But God’s salvation continues to unfold through us. The image of Christ’s crucified body, hanging lifeless from the cross, lingers in my spirits on this day. But so does my favorite benediction, from Teresa of Ávila: “Christ has no body now on earth but yours.” 

F O R D I S C U S S I O N

Respond to the questions raised by Stephanie Jaeger: What are our expectations about how God saves? Do we set ourselves up for disappointment by confusing modes of human victory with God’s saving grace?

Have you ever witnessed people cheering for a person or cause one moment and then turning on them the next? Describe what happened.

Lessons in faithfulness

It is Jesus' identity as rabbi, as teacher, that marks his last days.

ISAIAH 50:4–9 gives honor to the “tongue of a teacher.” Throughout his life, Jesus has carried the roles of prophet and priest, healer and even king. Yet it is his identity as rabbi, as teacher, that marks his last days. While the Gospel of John is known for Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples, Jesus is no less a teacher at the end of his ministry in Matthew—though in attitude and action as well as in word.

As the beginning of the end unfolds, Jesus self-identifies as teacher (*didaskalos*). Through each interaction that follows, he teaches us. He shows us how he himself keeps learning, keeps his ears open to “listen as those who are taught”—not for his own benefit but so that he may “sustain the weary with a word” (Isa. 50:4). He models humility without humiliation, insult without disgrace. Each scene in chapters 26 and 27 of Matthew offers hard-won lessons in the life of faith.

At the Passover meal, Jesus takes on the hard truth that it is not just the scribes and Pharisees, political rulers, or fickle crowds who will betray him. Over the sacred supper that celebrates God's faithfulness, Jesus faces his closest disciples and announces that he will be betrayed by one of them. When each of them asks, “Surely not I, Lord?” Jesus answers with silence. He responds only to Judas, leaving the responsibility in Judas's hands: “You have said so.” Yet in the next breath, Jesus announces that God is providing a new covenant. As the unleavened bread sustained our ancestors, so now God provides Christ's body to sustain us. As the blood of the Passover lamb once secured release from death, so now God provides Christ's own blood to rescue us—even in our ignorance and betrayal.

The first lesson is this: sooner or later, each of us will face the consequences of our choices, whether or not we are prepared to embrace them. Yet God's kingdom is larger than our failure, and God's covenant is stronger than our brokenness.

At the Mount of Olives, Jesus predicts that all his followers will desert him, even Peter. Indeed, the desertion begins even as Peter, James, and John are tapped to accompany Jesus in prayer. Three times—as Jesus is pouring his heart to God in grief and agitation—his companions succumb to sleep; three times Jesus rebukes them. The desertion continues as Judas betrays Jesus to the armed crowd. But Jesus rebukes only the unnamed disciple who responds with violence.

The second lesson is this: Christ does not pretend that we will be more faithful than we are. Instead, he points us to the trustworthy faithfulness of God in the midst of our struggle—a faithfulness more powerful than all the violence of the world can conquer.

At the hall of Caiaphas, Jesus faces the power of false witnesses—yet stays silent. And when Jesus is asked directly whether he is the Messiah, the Son of God, he answers, “You have said so”—modeling passive resistance, allowing others' words to reap what they sow. Then he takes those words and reclaims them according to God's intentions: “the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power.”

Similarly, before Pilate, Jesus again is confronted with a question—“Are you the King of the Jews?”—and again he answers, “You say so.” Again he is accused by the chief priests and the elders, and again he does not answer. Pilate tries repeatedly to free Jesus but is thwarted. Finally he washes his hands of responsibility, caving to the voice of the crowds. In the end, Pilate's people behave no better than the chief priest's. The high priest's retinue struck Jesus and spat on him; now Pilate's own soldiers do the same and more.

Yet in the face of gross degradation, Jesus teaches us this third lesson: we can choose the path of Isaiah, “I gave my back to those who struck me . . . I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.” We can choose the path of peaceful resistance, turning others' intended humiliation into humility and even power.

Jesus' final lesson for us comes at Golgotha. He is mocked by the soldiers, chief priests, scribes, and elders; he is taunted even by the bandits crucified with him. The words of Psalm 22 are fulfilled: “They divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots,” and “All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads. ‘He trusts in the Lord,’ they say, ‘let the Lord rescue him.’”

Yet Jesus responds not by denying God but by citing that very psalm as his prayer of lament: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” For he knows the verses that follow as well:

You are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the one Israel praises. In you our ancestors put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them. To you they cried out and were saved; in you they trusted and were not put to shame . . . I will declare your name to my people; in the assembly I will praise you. You who fear the Lord, praise him! . . . For he has not despised

or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help. . . . All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations bow down before him, for dominion belongs to the Lord and he rules over the nations.

This is the final lesson of the teacher. Now it is up to us, as we enter Holy Week, to seek to have what Philippians 2:5–11 calls “the same mind that was in Christ Jesus . . . who emptied himself” in his faithfulness, who emptied himself for our sake. CC

F O R D I S C U S S I O N

Christine Chakoian describes three “hard-won lessons in the life of faith” that Matthew’s passion narrative offers. How can these lessons help as we learn to have the same mind as Christ?

Spend time reflecting on Jesus’ faithfulness, especially during the events leading up to his crucifixion. You may even want to write a prayer of thanks.

The cross as good news for women

The passion narrative is the story of a series of violations. Is it good for women to find our identity in it?

SIX YEARS AGO, in a powerful article in these pages, Ruth Schmidt wrote about how her entire way of perceiving the world changed when she was raped. It was as if everything she had been during her previous 16 years had been thrown away. Since that event, “I see differently. I hear differently. I surely believe differently. I listen to music as a woman who was raped. I make decisions on what I will and will not purchase as a woman who was raped. I judge my work environment as a woman who was raped” (January 6–13, 1993). Ruth Schmidt came to see everything through that one lens. At least at the time of writing, the story of her violation defined her life.

Her statement is significant and provocative for those formulating a Christian hermeneutic of experience. Christians, after all, are called to interpret the events of their lives through one lens. We live as those who, in our baptisms, have been “marked by Christ forever.” Furthermore, we define ourselves through our association with one who was violated—who died a horrible and shameful death, was stripped naked and hung on a cross, who cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

The passion narrative is, to borrow Phyllis Trible’s phrase, “a text of terror.” It is the story of a series of violations. The narra-

tive has been shaped to force the reader to experience its events in slow motion. As if a movie camera stopped at every frame for a close-up shot, we seem to see every angry face in the crowd, to hear every word of abuse, to feel every blow. Gradually we become aware that this story contains every story of violation we have ever heard. Through God’s story, we read the stories of our own lives—not just those in which we play the part of Jesus, but also those in which we have been Judas, Peter, Pilate’s wife, false witnesses, fleeing disciples or members of an anonymous, uncaring crowd. Not only do we Christians tell and retell this story of terror, but we preach and try to live “Christ crucified.” We seek to have “the mind of Christ,” who humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

Recently the question has been asked: Is it good for Christian women to find their identity in one who was violated? Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is among those who wants to put warning labels on biblical texts before they are distributed to women: “Caution! Could be dangerous to your health and survival!” In “Christ Also Suffered: Why Certain Forms of Holiness Are Bad for You,” a poignant essay in Ann Loades’s *Searching for Lost Coins*, Loades criticizes what she thinks is a morbid overidentification with Christ as suffering victim.

It is possible to put too much emphasis on Christ as suffering

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victim, and biblical texts are often misused. Certainly we need to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy forms of religious life—although that is a complicated enterprise. (Was Francis of Assisi insane to give away his possessions to the poor? Or are we who endanger the planet by consuming far more than our share of the world’s resources the ones who are crazy?)

In *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, Wayne Booth reminds us that before we write off a text as sexist, we must learn to distinguish between what the characters in a story say and do and the point of view of the narrator. In many contemporary texts, the narrator is unreliable; in the biblical texts, the narrator—or, better, the implied author—is reliable.

If we pay attention to what the narrative is saying, we can see at least four reasons why God’s story is good news for women. The first is that the passion narrative does not blame the victim, as we so often do. Unlike Job’s friends (who are still very much with us), the narrator of the crucifixion story insists that the one put to death was righteous.

Second, God’s story honors the feelings of those who are violated. According to many statistics, 95 percent of the victims of domestic violence are women; some form of domestic violence occurs at least once in as many as two-thirds of all marriages; and one woman in four is sexually assaulted. Women often blame themselves—for not knowing how to deter an attacker, for falling apart afterwards. That’s why we need to notice that Jesus does not die well, according to the standards of his time. In the Greco-Roman world the noble death was exemplified by Socrates, who continued to instruct his disciples while he calmly drank his deadly dose of hemlock, or by Rabbi Akiba, who recited the Shema while he was dying. According to Matthew and Mark, Jesus died screaming.

While God’s story honors these feelings of fear, anger and horror, it warns us that our perceptions of what we are experiencing may be inaccurate. The experience of violation may not define us, after all. When Jesus cries, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” he feels abandoned by God. But the author’s point of view makes clear that this is not so.

In Matthew’s version Jesus says at Gethsemane, “Do you

think I cannot appeal to my Father and he will at once send me more than 12 legions of angels?” Later, when he is on the cross, some mock him by saying, “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross and we will believe you!” The reader is invited to wonder, “So where are those 12 legions of angels? Where’s even one lousy angel?”

Jesus feels that he dies alone. But the reader of the Gospels knows better. The veil of the temple is torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shakes. Rocks split, tombs open and the dead arise. All of creation resonates with the outrage of Jesus’s death. God is so visibly, powerfully present that even the Roman centurion exclaims, “Truly this was the Son of God!” Though Jesus may have doubted that he was still God’s beloved child, his bitter experience of abandonment was not the whole of reality—which is the third lesson of the passion story.

Those who have been violated are often discarded. Murder often follows rape. Those who survive are often rejected and humbled by others. Those who press charges are often put on trial themselves. But God’s story makes clear that people who are violated by others are vindicated by God. The crucified one is raised from the dead, lifted up, loved and honored. God’s story teaches us that human atrocities are not the last word. They do not define our identity. God alone does. God takes what the world considers trash and gives it honor. A woman’s value is not decided by the society in which she lives.

In addition to these four major lessons, the passion narratives also show how suffering tends to isolate us from others who cannot or will not understand our suffering. That one’s suffering intensifies when the enemy is also one’s Christian brother or sister is still not well understood by the church. But it is clear in God’s story, where one of “the twelve” betrays Jesus and another denies him.

What does it mean for women when their denominations privilege Ephesians 5 over 1 Corinthians 7? One of the things women learn from the passion narrative is that popular support comes and goes; for every substantial gain, expect a backlash. Women who read God’s story wisely will know better than to trust the fickle crowd. Instead, we will put our trust where it belongs: in the God who is faithful and true, the God who vindicates us. 

F O R D I S C U S S I O N

Katherine Grieb names at least four ways the passion narrative is good news specifically for women. How do you react to them?

“Women who read God’s story wisely,” writes Grieb, “will put our trust where it belongs: in the God who is faithful and true, the God who vindicates us.” How might this give you peace today?

Are we like Judas?

Maybe the real reason we show betrayers so little compassion is that we're afraid there is some Judas chromosome within all of us.

WE DON'T KNOW a lot about Judas, except that Jesus and the other disciples trusted him a great deal. No doubt that is why they made him their treasurer. We also know that at the Last Supper Judas was sitting next to Jesus when Jesus said that he would be betrayed by the one “who dips his hand into the bowl with me.” To share a bowl with Jesus meant that Judas was sitting in a position of honor and trust. All of that makes his betrayal more painful.

We would love to know exactly why Judas betrayed Jesus. Did he do it for the 30 pieces of silver? Or was it because he was disappointed in his Lord? Maybe Judas had never come to know Jesus as Lord. Matthew 26:22–25 tells us that when Jesus announced that one of them would betray him, all of them exclaimed, “Surely not I, Lord?” except Judas, who said, “Surely not I, Rabbi?” Was that it? Did Judas see Jesus only as a teacher? Maybe. In Exodus 21:32 we are told that the price paid for killing someone’s slave was 30 pieces of silver. Had Judas betrayed Jesus long ago by considering him one who had not fulfilled expectations? Again, we just don’t know.

Societies have always reserved their harshest judgment for those who commit some act of betrayal. It is a sin against the trust that is critical to maintain relationships between two people or among a nation’s people. Betrayal shatters the fragile bonds that hold us together, and when we lose our ability to live together we lose our ability to be truly human. That is why betrayal can destroy a marriage, family, church or community. It’s why the nation is outraged at a man who chose to fight against his country in Afghanistan, and why we are so disgusted with the managers of Enron. We have always been hard on Judas and all of his imitators.

Could it be that the real reason we show betrayers so little compassion is that we’re afraid there is some Judas chromosome within all of us? We hate the thought that we too are capable of betraying trust. When Jesus claimed that one of the Twelve would betray him, the anxiety within all of their souls rushed to the surface. “Surely not I, Lord?” They might as well have said, “I’ve been worried about that, but I thought I had it under control.”

The sin that is most difficult to forgive in others is always the one we struggle against in our own lives. This is particularly true if we have lied to ourselves about our trustworthiness so often that we no longer think we have a dark side. None is as merciless to others as the one who has no mercy on his own capacity for evil.

In Jesus’ last hours none of the disciples was a model of faithfulness. Peter denied knowing his Lord three times. After the awful crucifixion was over, none of the Twelve even attended to Jesus’ body. At a time when trustworthiness could have endangered them, all the disciples failed.

That terrifies us. We think we are doing OK on our commitments now, but we just don’t know about that terrible Judas chromosome. When will it kick in like a cancer and destroy a life built on righteous resolve? Since we all live with the possibility of betrayal, we fear Judas more than we fear the cross. The cross is a symbol of heroic self-sacrifice. But Judas is a symbol of the evil within us.

One of the messages of Holy Week is that sooner or later every disciple will betray Jesus. We will betray him in the workplace when it will cost too much to think like a Christian, and in our homes when the anger is so great that we hurt those who trust us, and in the sacred commitments we make that we simply cannot keep. We will betray Jesus by our indifference to the poor, by our refusal to turn the other cheek to our enemies, and by the deaf ears we turn to heaven’s call to live for higher purposes.

When Judas realized the gravity of his actions, he was filled with remorse and said, “I have sinned in betraying innocent blood.” We are told that he then repented. But that’s not enough. To repent means to turn, and what is most important is *where* we turn in our repentance.

Judas turned to those who despised him, and went back to the chief priests to return the money. But these priests were so self-righteous that they wouldn’t contaminate themselves with blood money. The powerful maintain their power by refusing to show mercy on failures.

By contrast, Peter and the other disciples lived with their betrayal until they encountered the risen Savior, the only one who could offer forgiveness. In the gospel according to Judas there is no forgiveness, there is just sin and the futile effort to make things right on your own. In the gospel of Jesus, there is always

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grace that can create a new ending to our lives. All we have to do is turn to him.

It is striking that Judas and Jesus died about the same time, one as a tragic suicide and the other as a forgiving sacrifice.

Judas portrays the tragic story of a fall from the heights to the depths. It is a fall that all of us will make sooner or later. But the greatest tragedy was that Judas was not at the cross to hear Jesus say, “Father, forgive . . .”



FOR DISCUSSION

Imagine you knew Judas. Write a short description of him.

What do you think of Craig Barnes’s suggestion that “the reason we show betrayers so little compassion” might be that “we’re afraid there is some Judas chromosome within all of us?”

Have you ever felt like you betrayed Jesus?

Jesus’ joy

Jesus gives us a new commandment—but not one that requires grim, stoic obedience.

JOHN 13 BEGINS with imminent betrayal, suffering, and death. Understandably, we tend to envision the scene with somber images. Sobriety is called for; the cross and the bitter irony of Jesus being “raised up” are at hand. We are about to be told a strict commandment, which we’d better obey or else become another Judas. *Maundy* means *commandment*; it’s Commandment Thursday. Jesus’ expression should be serious. Or perhaps we imagine he is already exhausted from the agony to come, barely hanging on, waiting for it all to be over.

I wonder if we overlook Jesus’ *joy*. On a wooded hill in Baguio, a city in the mountains of the Philippines, there is a large wooden crucifix. Jesus’ feet and left hand are nailed to the light, reddish-brown wood. But his right hand is reaching out to those who come to the cross. His palm is up toward the heavens; he is inviting us to be with him, indeed even to join him on the cross. And he has the most wonderful, delight-filled smile. It is not the raptured agony-ecstasy of holy pain; it is a countenance of persuasive gladness.

Over the years, I developed a confused understanding of what we are supposed to do in church this particular night. I can re-

member going to a number of different events and services on the Thursday before Easter. At seders we celebrated the Passover feast (as per the assigned Exodus reading). Communion services in fellowship halls recalled the institution of the Lord’s Supper (see the scheduled lesson from 1 Corinthians). Foot washing reenacted Jesus’ humble gesture. During Tenebrae services, church leaders read texts solemnly and extinguished candles one by one. Amid such services, someone would read the words of Jesus in strict liturgical monotone and tell us to love one another. We all went home, not really needing a Good Friday service since Jesus was pretty much already up on the cross.

How have I presented John 13:33–35 over my years as a pastor? What do my own facial expression and tone of voice convey? Jesus addresses the disciples as “little children,” and I wonder if my experience as a parent has been influential. Am I like an annoyed father who groans out “love one another” the same way I might plead for children to get along? Am I thinking about a conflict with someone in the congregation, someone I am having a hard time loving, and so my expression conveys guilt and inadequacy? Or maybe I think this is a great opportunity to reenergize the congregation and get it more involved in the local food pantry,

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and so I belt out, “Love one another!” I wonder what the countenance of Jesus was like that night.

One problem here is that the lectionary gives us only the beginning of Jesus’ farewell discourse. His later words in chapters 14–17 clarify the provocative washing of feet and declaring of a new commandment. He speaks of joy: “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love. . . . I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete” (15:10–11). Earlier in John, he speaks evocatively of abundant life (10:10).

And in John 13:1–17, Peter boldly calls for a full shower instead of just a foot washing. At some level Peter is already aware of what Jesus makes explicit in chapter 14: that Jesus is indeed the way, the truth, and the life and that to be separated from him would be simply unbearable. Yes, there is to be betrayal, abandonment, suffering, and death, but this is all a part of the glorification of God. The atmosphere is victory; joy most certainly will be complete. Sorrow will be turned to joy, just as the travails of childbirth lead to delight in the newborn (16:20–22). The words and gestures of our Maundy Thursday lesson are part of the fullness of joy that awaits the disciples—the joy that Jesus also extends to the church.

If this is why Jesus has gathered them together, what might we infer about his countenance? And how might this inter-

pretive question shape the way readers present the Gospel in worship?

Is Jesus enjoying a wonderful, deeply purposeful final gathering before his agony? (Luke states in 22:15 that Jesus is “eagerly” looking forward to the meal they will share together.) Might we imagine Jesus with a joy-filled smile? Much depends on what we think of life with God—or, to use John’s language, of abiding in Jesus as he abides in us. Is loving one another something we’ve *got* to do, or something we *get* to do—something we *can* do only because God in Christ has already loved us?

The Jesus hanging from the cross on that hilltop extends his right hand toward us and draws us toward him. His face is alive with expectation—he is eager to share a new way of living abundantly with us. And so he gives us a commandment, but not one that requires grim, stoic obedience. The love Jesus invites us into is wonderful. We get to put aside all the wearying vanities and nonsense of life. We are becoming no longer Jesus’ servants but his friends (15:15).

Theologians sometimes understand the Trinity as mutually indwelling love, and Jesus is beckoning us into this joyous, divine abiding-in-one-another. Is it too much to imagine that on this night the Lord is joyful as he gives us the blessing of Numbers 6? He blesses and keeps us, makes his face to shine upon us, lifts his countenance upon us, and gives us peace. CC

F O R D I S C U S S I O N

Think about Jesus and his disciples at the Passover meal now known as the Last Supper. Write down three words to describe what you see.

Do you see or feel joy? Explain.

What does it mean to you to see Jesus washing his disciples’ feet? What message do you take from his service?

The confusion Pilate feels

Things he cannot touch: creative life, confounding power

“WHAT IS TRUTH?” Pilate asks in John 18:38. He is trying to reconcile this person he sees before him with the turmoil swirling in his city. He is trying to place Jesus in terms he can understand. Kingship. Power. Authority.

Who is this man who seems to have power, seems to have authority, and yet here he is—bound, bleeding, seemingly despised? Jesus seems to embody the paradox of Psalm 22’s “why” and “yet.” (“Why have you forsaken me . . . Yet you are holy.”) Jesus is the one in chains, the one who has been betrayed, the one whose friends have left him, the one who needs Pilate to save him.

And yet Jesus is the one who speaks of bearing witness and truth. Jesus seems to possess all the certainty, while Pilate is the one who seems confused. Pilate plucks out a word, *kingship*, as a way of tethering himself as he looks from Jesus to the crowd to the Sanhedrin. But the question is resolved only in terms of who has power and who can keep it—more specifically, how Pilate can keep his.

Jesus’ invocation of truth and witness is about a different kind of power, though. Truth is something that is not held or wielded or manipulated so much as unveiled, revealed as having been there all along. Truth reverberates, even within the psalmist’s questions, even while the questions seem irreconcilable. *We are suffering, yet you are strong, God*, they cry out again and again. The psalm seems to swing between these claims until the end, where “future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.”

How can both of these things be true? The power of the empire and the power of God? It is a question my students and my wife’s congregants ask repeatedly in the midst of a world where, despite our advances in science, medicine, and computers, somehow fear and greed and ignorance march forward relentlessly. The “why” of the psalmist feels like the most real thing. The “yet” feels like a fantasy.

Toni Morrison reflects on a related question: How can a people hold a certainty of themselves in the midst of utter and violent refusal? Morrison writes, “Black people could be enslaved for generation after generation and recorded in statistics along with lists of rice, tar, and turpentine cargo, but they did not turn out to be cargo. . . . Why was the quality of my

great-grandmother’s life so much better than the circumstances of her life?” How do people begin to create space, to bear witness to a truth about themselves and their community that gets refused in seemingly countless ways on a daily basis? How does one speak and live into a truth while facing down the powers and principalities?

Quoting Bessie Head, Morrison writes that “we tolerate strangers because the things we love cannot be touched by them.” Throughout history there have been women and men creating life and confounding power.

Between Morrison and the psalmist, I wonder if we begin to feel something of the truth Jesus speaks of and the confusion Pilate feels.

There is something in this world—beyond the violence and the manipulation and the denial and the misapprehension—something that sits lodged in our midst, pressing on our chests and not letting some of us forget who we are. There is something Pilate cannot touch, and *kingship* is the only word he can use to grasp it. But its power is too deep, too alive, too free to be contained in such a fragile status as “king.”

Jesus knows his people, and his people know him. The recognition of truths that bind us to one another is ephemeral and indeterminate and yet unrelentingly present. The truth cannot be scourged with whips or mocked with crowns of thorns and faux garments. The truth rings in a way that shivers the very ground and causes curtains to tear from heaven to earth.

The truth of Good Friday is that while Pilate scurries between Jesus and the people and his little bowl of water and back, trying desperately to hold onto little folds of papered authority, Jesus had already sunk his hands deep into the ground and grasped the roots of our lives. We are his. He is ours. God has become like us, so that we might become like God. We see him and he sees us. There are things we love that Pilate cannot touch.

In such dire times, perhaps it is not the academics or the politicians or the pastors who will help us to see our way through. Maybe it is the aunties, the grandmothers and grandfathers who knew, who lived the truth they themselves had received from their own mothers and aunts and

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grandmothers. We cannot learn this truth. We cannot accumulate it. We can only live it, and let it live in us. It is a truth we can only let seep into us in mornings and dinners and

nods on the street, through the music in the car, sometimes even at Sunday gatherings. Good Friday is here, yet Sunday is coming. 

FOR DISCUSSION

Brian Bantum uses both Psalm 22 and Toni Morrison's words to describe the truth Jesus speaks of and the confusion Pilate feels. Think about the differences between Jesus and Pilate. Do you think Bantum's words accurately describe the tension?

What, to you, is the truth of Good Friday? Spend time sitting with this truth and reflecting on this day.

Waiting for Easter's good news

**We stay home. We look out for others.
We wait—but for what?**

HOLY SATURDAY is no one's favorite religious holiday. It lacks the darkness and the drama of a dying Savior. Nor is it bathed in light to celebrate a risen Lord. Its color is a liminal gray.

But it's where we are, all of us. It's the season that we are in.

Holy Saturday is a very quiet day. When I was a boy, I was always outraged that so much could be going on in the world while Jesus was resting in his tomb. Today is different. Today, it's as if the whole world—my world, at least—is observing a regimen of silence in honor of the Lord's burial. In Wuhan and San Francisco and Atlanta and St. Louis the streets are empty, or at least less traveled. In the rural buffer where I live (a liminal space between a university and surrounding farmland), our road is quieter than usual. No one misses street noise, but it is spring, and I miss the music blasting through our campus, the sounds of laughter and the murmur of learned conversations from tables along the sidewalks.

After the horrors of Good Friday, Saturday is a day of decompression and meditation. In a time of pandemic, our new season of Holy Saturday invites us to reexamine our spiritual bearing when, as Psalm 46 says, the kingdoms are tottering, the earth is melting, and desolations threaten the earth. "Be still

and know that I am God." The command sounds harsh, but it isn't a rebuke, as in "Be quiet." It's an invitation to enter the supernatural stillness of God. It means "Don't be afraid of what comes next."

The Gospels say little about the disciples' behavior on Holy Saturday. We can only imagine. It was a day of rest. They were required to rest. What preparations the women made must have been done furtively.

In the world of the coronavirus, we are also waiting. But waiting for what? When the women came to the tomb in the gray morning, they came not with high hopes but with their world's version of embalming fluid. In Hebrew, the verbs "wait" and "hope" can be rendered by the same word. But in a time of contagion, our waiting does not appear to be enriched by hope any more than theirs was.

Our waiting has an intransitive feel. "For what?" is hard to answer. For it to be over. For those who are sick to recover. For a magically resurrected economy. For school to start and the multiplex to open. For baseball. For a paycheck once again. Waiting to get back to where we were—which for many of us wasn't a good place to begin with. The people who clean hotel rooms, who work at Macy's or the shop down the block, whose

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husbands or wives have died and remain unburied, who live in prisons, who are hoping for a bed in the ICU—what are they waiting for?

But waiting, like hoping, demands an object. We are waiting for a solution to the inexplicable. We are waiting for deliverance from our vulnerability to nature, of course—and from death—but even more from our vulnerability to the self-interest, lying, hoarding, and venality that make the pandemic even worse. Which is to say, we want to be delivered from ourselves.

Our season of Holy Saturday is also a time of caring for others. We are Facetimeing, Zooming, and Skyping with friends and family. We are also looking out for neighbors we haven't seen in a while and loosening our wallets for those who can no longer clean our houses or clear our gutters. Two days ago, I got a beautiful letter from a parishioner I cared for 42 years ago. Now she is caring for me. It's the pandemic to be sure, but it's also the season of Holy Saturday, a time to reflect on the blessings of friendship, marriage, community, and hope.

In a time of pandemic, conspiracy theories go viral and new ethical issues arise unbidden. How can we know the truth? Whose authority shall we trust? The president's? The CDC? Fox News? How shall we balance personal safety and economic health? What are the ethics of taking chances? Is it right to profit from the pandemic? How can we make sure that treatment of the rich doesn't take precedence over care for the poor?

The moral questions are not new. In 1527 the bubonic plague returned to the city of Wittenberg, Germany. It was a recurrence of the scourge that had killed more than 25 percent of Europe's population in the 14th century. As the religious leader of his community, Martin Luther was obliged to address the question, May one flee the city in a time of plague? Luther counseled the government to establish centralized hospitals to avoid the contamination of individual homes and to move the cemeteries outside the city. In words that sound familiar to us, he wrote, "Then I shall

fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine, and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance infect and pollute others." Plague clarifies the obligation to one's neighbor. Pastors should remain with their flock. Luther stayed.

We believe that the Good Shepherd participates in the plague and subjects himself to its suffering and anxiety. The Gospels do not sugarcoat his fear in Gethsemane or his suffering on the cross.

His presence was especially vivid for people living in the Middle Ages. They knew firsthand the horrors of sickness, childbirth, medical care, death, and the local burial pit. The crucified God was their only refuge.

It is within this frame that we meet the mystic and anchoress Julian of Norwich. The plague of 1348–49 is still a fresh memory in East Anglia. Julian is desperately ill on her bed, struggling to breathe and preparing to die. The priest has been called. As he intones the final blessing, he holds a crucifix before her eyes.

Then a strange thing happens. The figure on the cross begins to bleed, shedding great stalactites of blood and mucous. In an image shocking for its sensuousness, Julian compares the blood to water dripping from the eaves of a house and to strips of herring flayed at her kitchen sink. Later, when she describes Jesus' dead body, with its pustules and blue-blackened color, she is giving a clinical picture of something everyone in Norwich and in all of England would have immediately recognized.

It is a picture of a man who is willing to catch the very disease that he cures. Who visits a young woman's house in a time of plague and, while healing her, dies of it himself.

The best-known line of Julian's *Revelations* is this: "But all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." But my favorite occurs several chapters later, when the Lord says, "You shall not be overcome." 

F O R D I S C U S S I O N

Describe how you've felt on Holy Saturday in past years—and how you feel this year.

Read Psalm 46. Does it provide any comfort to you?

How does Julian of Norwich's story help you see a suffering, crucified Christ in the midst of COVID-19?

The risen Christ is on the move

What kind of faith gets you through 25 years in a refugee camp?

THE CHOIR DIRECTOR at the church where I serve has unusual credentials. She used to lead a large choir in the Nyarugusu refugee camp in Tanzania. She grew up there herself: her extended family fled from violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and then spent almost 25 years in Tanzania before resettlement in San Diego in 2016. I met Matrída that fall, when she arrived at St. Luke's with her two young children and her voice that moves worshipers to tears, whether or not they understand Swahili or Kibembe.

Matrída also leads a band, which recently held a Congolese gospel concert at the church on a Saturday night. The diverse audience cheered as the dancers moved in unison, and my own voice rose unbridled when her nine-year-old son temporarily took center stage. It was a victory cry—let's just say he hasn't received a lot of positive attention at school since his US arrival.

The next day, a white congregant in his seventies said he couldn't stop wondering about the concert: What kind of faith gets you through 25 years in a refugee camp singing God's praises? What kind of faith has you dancing and writing new songs about Jesus as you pick flowers and paint ships to try to make rent? What kind of faith is this?

Nearly 2,000 years down the line, we still struggle to absorb the breadth of God's Eastertide movement. Despite Peter's astonished declaration in Acts 10:34–35—"I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him"—and our hearty intellectual assent to the same, we still seem to need our own Acts 10 moments. We need to be surprised again by God's presence in unexpected places.

Peter's wonder that gentiles could be accepted by God in Christ without adopting Jewish practices is worth trying to translate. This is the pivotal awakening to a church that is for every nation. The repercussions of the Acts 10 moment, and the insistent advocacy of Paul, give birth to Christianity as a faith where you do not have to become someone you are not—ethnically, culturally, or linguistically—to be at peace with the God known first by the people of Israel. Because homogenous churches remain the norm, this can be as shocking today as it was in the first century.

Do we "truly understand" that God shows no partiality,

that everyone who trusts in Jesus receives the peace of forgiveness and might join in the victory song of God's Easter people?

"I shall not die," says the psalmist, "but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord!" Each song Matrída's band offered could be heard as a variation on the themes of Psalm 118, with a special affection for Jesus as the name of the one who has opened the gates of righteousness. They varied from the day-to-day theology of "Mwokozi wetuanatupa furaha dumia" (Our Savior gives us joy on earth) to the sweetly imaginative image of dancing with Jesus in heaven expressed by "Mimina Yesu sitamuacha" (Jesus and me). Do we who are white Americans, ashamed of our ancestors' colonial sins, understand how this could be? Maybe we don't, and it's time we acknowledge our own ignorance and provinciality. Or maybe we simply need to be reminded that the resurrection bears good news to us, whoever we are, but it never belongs to us.

To celebrate Easter is to celebrate a new epoch of history in relationship to God, not just an event that gives hope for a new day in our lives (though it can do that, too). If our vision is getting nearsighted, we need to listen again as the angel in Matthew's Gospel account foreshadows this expansive dynamism of the Easter faith: "Go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him'" (Matthew 28:7). We must try to catch up and witness what God is doing in Christ, "alive and at large in the world."

That's a phrase from poet John Masefield: God's ongoing work in Christ is never comatose or captive, neither to local geographies nor to the hidden fences of human expectations. I tend to want the kingdom of God to be developed in a tidy, linear fashion. If I can't detect change, I begin to doubt the architectural plans and progress of the one who laid the chief cornerstone. I'm always looking for God outside Jerusalem, or wherever I saw him last. Why isn't the risen one showing up for the implicit work I assigned? To hear again, through Peter's own surprise, that the Spirit of Jesus is "at large" is to know and trust that he is always active—and that we too must remain on the move.

As we try, stumbling, to go where the angels or visions or dreams or Christ himself tells us, we may indeed encounter him,

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often unexpectedly. This is the smile-worthy back and forth of this Gospel story. “He is going ahead of you,” says the angel, so Mary and Mary run to tell the disciples. But then—surprise!—Jesus meets them on the way with a sunny “Greetings!” They fall down to worship him, and Jesus offers words of comfort and

courage: “Do not be afraid.” But then: come now, let’s keep moving. “Go, and tell my brothers to go . . .”

Jesus is on the move, and the Easter epoch of reconciliation is unfolding in ways we cannot understand—but might occasionally be privileged to witness. CC

F O R D I S C U S S I O N

Laurel Mathewson asks what kind of faith gets a person through life in a refugee camp. Replace “refugee camp” with “pandemic.” How does the message of Easter help you?

Mathewson highlights in Matthew 28:7 the theme of the risen Christ in motion and our need to “try to catch up and witness what God is doing.” Do you think your vision has gotten near-sighted in the way she describes?

Throughout this week, look out for times you might encounter Christ in unexpected ways.