

If these were “ordinary” times, we’d be preparing to spend many hours together in church over the next few days. Today, we’d wave palm branches, shout “Hosanna,” and listen to the story of Jesus’s death and burial. On Maundy Thursday, we’d share in the Passover meal, wash each other’s feet, and strip our altars bare. Then by Good Friday, we who shouted “Hosanna! Save us!” will cry out with the crowd in scripture, “Crucify him!”. We’d keep vigil in our pews, walk the Stations of the Cross, and listen to homilies on the Last Seven Words of Christ. On Holy Saturday, we’d wait, drained and tired, but full of anticipation for Easter and its many joys.

But these aren’t ordinary times. These days we are confined to our homes, and our church family cannot gather in person. Some of us have lost our jobs, our paychecks, our savings, our futures, our sanity. Some of us are numb and withdrawn, unable to process the scope of what’s happening around the world. Some of us are depressed. Anxious. Lonely. Terrified. Some of us are sick. Many of us are grieving over so many losses.

One of the most famous writers of all time, Anais Nin, is attributed with saying, “We do not see things as they are, we see them as we are.” Very seldom does the world come together in agreement in seeing things as they are, and as we are. The world can agree that our lives these days feel abnormal. Everything seems in complete disarray and out of sync with the way things used to be. But sometimes disharmony, dissonance, conflict can be our reality. And our reality today is all about being in tension.

True enough, these days I find myself doing things that I normally would not do. These days I find myself digging for worms in the backyard so Kendall and I can go fishing. I find myself making time to play a few games of badminton every day at five o’clock with Kendall in the backyard. And I find myself moving furniture in the living room so that I can join Kendall in doing an evening choreographed dance workout video. Like I said...things are a bit abnormal.

Sometimes I ask myself, “Where am I?” and I’m sure you’ve asked this same question of yourself. I feel Kendall and I have unintentionally created our own personal retirement home within our home, or at least an adult summer camp. Sometimes disharmony is reality. And right now, dissonance is completely our reality.

Today, on this last Sunday of Lent, we find ourselves innocently walking into more tension. Conflict is hidden all over today’s scripture and liturgy. Is it Palm Sunday, or Passion Sunday? Or is it both? If you are old enough to remember, there was a time when Passion Sunday was observed two Sundays prior to Easter. On this Sunday the story of Jesus’s sufferings was shared. On the following Sunday, Palm Sunday was observed. On that Sunday we remember Jesus entering triumphantly into Jerusalem ready to go to his cross on our behalf. Somewhere along the way both of these services were combined into one: Palm/Passion Sunday. So, are we celebrating in a parade with waving palm branches, or are we crying tears of pain as we watch Jesus suffer on his way to his cross? Parade or Passion? Or does the slash (/) in today’s liturgical title (Palm/Passion Sunday) say more about today, and what we will go through with Jesus this Holy Week than anything else?

Today, Jesus enters Jerusalem for the last time. Finally, he makes his move on the Holy City and the powers that be who have come there for the annual Jewish Passover Festival. As he makes his way through the village of Bethphage to the front gates of Jerusalem he is not greeted by a crowd with harmonious praise, but by dissonance. Everything about Jesus’ entry into the city is in disagreement with the reality of the situation.

The crowd that greets Jesus with waving palm branches are not there in celebration of the upcoming Passover Festival, they are celebrating a possible revolt. The crowd believes Jesus has

come to save them from Rome’s rule. They believe Jesus to be a king who has brought the revolution they had hoped for.

Matthew tells us that the Holy City under Roman rule is “stirred up” by the “parade”. Awakened by the commotion, they come and see, and from their perspective witness a “protest”. The citizens ask those in the crowd, “Who is this?” and the answer given could not be further from the truth. “Oh, that’s just the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee. We cry Hosanna! (literally translated to mean, “save us”), because he is the one who is going to save us.”

But Jesus has come to enter the city gates of Jerusalem to die on his cross – not to be praised or welcomed by palm branches through a protest to do the crowd’s will. No, Jesus comes to do the will of God. One would expect a king to enter their town on horseback, clothed in a suit of armor and followed by an army of soldiers; and yet here was Jesus, entering Jerusalem on the back of a donkey and clothed in rags. This scene reminds me of the movie Shrek, when Shrek rescues Princess Fiona from the tower and the fire-breathing dragon with the help of his trusty “steed” ...Donkey. This fat, green ogre, was not at all what she expected in a knight who would save her from the castle and the dragon.

By choosing to ride a nursing donkey and have her colt trot alongside should convey to everyone in praise and protest that Jesus is not the kind of king they are wanting, but it is the kind of king they are unknowingly needing. Without words Jesus’ message is clear, “I accept your misplaced hosannas, because you shout more truth than you know. But I am a king of peace, not of war. I am the sacrificial lamb you all are choosing today for the upcoming Passover. And I am nonviolently going to undergo my slaughter by your hands. I will die by my cross for you so that my blood covers your sins and death passes over you.”

In their compelling book, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Last Days in Jerusalem*, New Testament scholars, Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan argue that the procession we celebrate on Palm Sunday was most likely a protest march. On that day there was a “peasant procession” led by Jesus as he entered Jerusalem from the east. At the same time there could have easily been a full-fledged “imperial procession” led by Pontius Pilate and his soldiers from the west. According to Borg and Crossan, Jesus’ entry deliberately countered what was happening on the other side of the city. Pilate’s entry embodied the power, glory, and violence that was Rome in which ruled the present world. Jesus’ entry however, in direct contrast, embodied a different world, the kingdom of God.

Dissonance. The way Jesus walks this day is a way that is decidedly opposite the way the world walks. And the way that Jesus walks and talks might be left solely for Jesus to do, if he had not commanded us to also walk and talk in the same way. Earlier along this journey Jesus clearly said not only that he would go to the cross but that we should go to the cross as well. “Take up your cross daily and follow me,” he said. Discipleship is always a matter of imitation. I suspect that the crowd that day did not get Jesus’ message. How many of them actually followed him? After all, that’s not what they were wanting from him. They wanted and expected something world-altering. An ending to the story, worthy of their worship, worthy of their broken palm branches and dusty clothes on the road. What they got however was not what they wanted.

Maybe we are like the crowd in this regard. We too scream out loud, “Hosanna! Hosanna! Save us! Save us from this nightmare that is the coronapocalypse!” Maybe we too want to see a god show up who makes the world perfect for us, who makes wrongs right for us, who bears our crosses for us so that we don’t have to. But like the crowd, the god they wanted isn’t the God who shows up. The God who shows up hears our “hosannas,” accepts the misplaced

parade/protest, and paves the way to the cross anyways, saying to us, “Take up your crosses and follow me.” This Holy Week we are not only to watch Jesus go to his cross; we are to follow him to ours.

For most of us, our life is a matter of attempting to swim with the current. To work at getting in sync with the beat of the music, to dance to the tune that most people seem to be following. And we might have been able to keep up – to go with the flow – if we had never met Jesus. But Jesus moves us against the current. He seems determined to move us onto a different path. Perhaps God has made a way for us during this time of quarantine to “slow our roll” and get in sync with him this Holy Week. To follow his movements to the cross. To listen to the phantom drums playing the “Funeral Duty/ Dead March” as Jesus begins following the Holy Spirit’s escort to his execution. To be like Christ is to be obedient to God’s will.

For example, in today’s epistle lesson from Paul’s letter to the Philippians, Paul doesn’t just speak of the attitude that was in Christ – that attitude formed so closely in obedience with the will of God as to be one with God. Paul also says we should “adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5). But what does that mean? Jesus clearly doesn’t think the way we think. Paul demonstrated that by quoting this hymn found in Philippians 2:5-11: “though Christ was God, full of divine favor, Jesus was not content to remain fully equal with God. He emptied himself and became the humble suffering servant – suffering even to the point of death on a cross”.

So today we begin our walk behind Jesus to his cross. Jesus goes to suffer before us and on our behalf; to atone for us and for our sins. And as we begin this week, Paul the Apostle makes a rather difficult and intimidating demand of us. He tells us that we ought to mimic the moves of Jesus, to bend our lives toward his downward direction and try to imitate his steps up

to Jerusalem. By attempting to follow Jesus we become more like Jesus. And so we go to the cross, to our inevitable deaths but we do not have to walk to the cross alone.

At our first Christmas together after my father’s death, my mom and I went up to Winston-Salem, North Carolina to be with my sister. I remember how difficult life was for everyone during that time. I remember how hard it was just to get through the loss of my father’s presence as we unwrapped presents together. In the months before that Christmas evening I decided I would take my father’s old t-shirts and make a blanket out of them. So, I painfully cut up his t-shirts, sent them to the quilt making company to have them made into a blanket. I wrapped it up and then waited until the moment came for my mom to unwrap the handmade blanket of his t-shirts. I remember as she unwrapped the present and saw what it was, how much she cried and cried and cried. I remember feeling as if this was the cruelest thing I could have done as she folded over and collapsed into that blanket of t-shirts. And as she wrapped herself in his old shirts (mustard stains and all), smelling the memory of him, I wept and thought to myself, “how can something be so unbearably sad, and yet at the same time, so unbelievably beautiful?”

In the presence of Jesus’ love, a love that goes beyond death, we want to fall down. At the cross, we can’t help but crumble at his feet. Because the truth is every one of us is going to Jerusalem, down to our deaths. Every one of us will suffer. But we don’t have to go it alone. We don’t have to walk to the cross alone. To take up our cross as Jesus did is to stand, always, in the hot white center of our own pain as well as the world’s pain. Not just to glance in the general direction of suffering and then inch away, but to dwell there.

In the context of our current pandemic, it means trusting that God is in the very midst of the loss and terror, mourning with us 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 control and 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.

To be honest, like many of you, I come to this Holy Week tired, uncertain, and afraid. Who knows how many sorrows, disappointments, farewells, and rough endings we will face before resurrection comes home to stay? I can't imagine most of it, and sometimes I can't bear any of it. But Jesus can. If anything in the Christian story is true, then this must be true as well: our suffering is God's suffering; our sorrow is Jesus's sorrow. Jesus will hold all of our pains in his crucified arms.

So, welcome to Holy Week. Here we are, and here is our suffering, sorrowing, saving God. Here are our hosannas, broken and unbroken, hopeful and hungry. Here is the cross upon which we stand. Let us say together as the crowd did that Palm Sunday, yet understanding what we are saying with the Psalmist, “Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord.” And let us also say as many did in complete belief that Good Friday, “Truly this man, Jesus, was God's Son”— sent to die so that we may live.