

Palm/Passion Sunday, Year A
April 9, 2017
Matthew 26:14-27:66
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We have just begun our pilgrimage into the deep shadow lands of Holy Week. Here we enter into the events and the crisis that defines who this man Jesus is, and what that means for us who are his followers. The week begins with glimpses of promise and possibility, shouts of “Hosanna”, rays of hope and celebration rippling through the crowd when Jesus rides into Jerusalem. There are the long shadows cast by friendship, intimacy, and community among the twelve disciples and Jesus. And there is always present the shadow cast by a different world. A world which remains mostly hidden. A wholly different kingdom where God reigns and the law is love.

And all the while, there are other more ominous shadows that come into view. Shadows of betrayal and denial and failed faithfulness. The shadow of treachery, false witness, and an unjust political system. Shadows of crowd mentality and self-righteousness. The shadow of self-preservation in Pilate the governor, a shadow that prevents his acting with courage on behalf of an innocent man. Shadows of mockery and shame, pain and violence inflicted by Roman soldiers. The shadow of God’s presence and the shadow of God’s felt absence. The shadow of death and burial in a tomb.

In Matthew’s gospel, this mix of promise and looming shadows is present on the horizon, there from the very beginning, before Jesus is even born. There were shadows of fear and uncertainty for Mary and Joseph. An angel appears to Joseph and says “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. She will bear a son born of the Holy Spirit, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” Not long after Jesus’ birth, the shadows of jealousy and treachery appear on the horizon, cast by the long-armed reach of the suspicious and insecure King Herod, the Roman occupying ruler who is threatened by the rumor of another king in the land. Fleeing the shadow of death, Joseph and Mary escape with the infant Jesus to Egypt because Herod orders the slaughter of infants two years old and younger, his effort to eliminate any competition to his throne and the larger empire.

These shadows are sign posts for us. Signposts that point to the cosmic clashing between God and all other created powers. Powers by which humanity has always been held captive. The shadows loom and remain because this is a colossal colliding of kingdoms. All the events of Holy Week point to these lingering and ever present shadows that exist in and around us individually and among us collectively. The shadows are most easily seen in the systems by which we order our lives – geopolitical, economic, social, religious.

The invitation during this Holy Week is for us to sit among these shadows of darkness and light that are cast by this God's story and the human story – the defining story of our salvation. We are invited to enter into the story and ask ourselves - Where are the shadows that might lurk unseen, hidden in and around me? In and around us?

So let yourself be drawn into this passion story and follow wherever God's Spirit wants to take you as we stand in the shadow of the cross. I am drawn to Peter. Enthusiastic, 110% committed to following Jesus, reliable, "get the job done" Peter. He is among Jesus' inner circle of closest friends. Bold and brash and gutsy. Speaking confidently what he *knows* to be true. Certain that *he* has what it takes to remain steadfast, loyal, & faithful – to stand by Jesus, come hell or high-water. As Jesus' final night with the disciples unfolds, the shadows gather, growing darker and more threatening. Peter falls asleep in the garden, just can't be attentive to Jesus when Jesus most needs the support of his friends, needs to be assured he is not all alone. Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss, and Jesus is lead off to trial. The shadow of fear begins to emerge deep inside Peter. At the same time Jesus is on trial, Peter faces his own trial outside in the courtyard. Three different people believe that Peter is a follower of the man now on trial before Pilate, and so they ask him. *Didn't I see you with Jesus the Galilean? No, you're mistaken, says Peter. I was never with him. I don't know the man.* Three times the question is posed about his relationship with Jesus. Three times Peter says he has no relationship with Jesus. He doesn't just deny being a follower of Jesus. He denies knowing *anything* of Jesus. How do you in an instant erase an intimate three year relationship? Lie and pretend it never existed? Overwhelming fear. The cock crows and the judgment falls. Peter experiences first-hand the remorse of failed faithfulness. What a blow to his pride and sense of self-sufficiency. What just happened? How could he have said that? How could he have let the Lord down? He was supposed to be a leader among the twelve. O brother Peter, I'm right there, too, knowing the exuberance and joy of following Jesus, and yet often I'm not really prepared to face how hard the life of a disciple is. Sometimes it's downright scary. And I, too, try to lean on my own strength and confidence, sure that I can keep the promises I've made. But it doesn't work. I fail.

Another place I find myself drawn in by this passion story is when the twelve are gathered with Jesus for their last supper together. I hope you have known at times, as have I, the closeness and trust, the spiritual nurture and growth, the caring and support that comes from spending time with others who follow Jesus. And maybe too, we have known betrayal, the deep and painful wounding that we, the faithful and flawed followers of Jesus do to others. "Surely not I, Lord?" By God's grace, on occasion glimpses of light will break through and we experience the tender and restorative healing that the community of the faithful offers in Jesus' name. Thinking about the twelve, I found myself wondering if maybe Jesus knew how much we would need to be together often to remember him. To be strengthened by God's love after Jesus was gone. So he left himself, his essence there for the disciples who sat around the table, sharing the broken bread and common cup. "Take, eat; this is my body. Drink from it, all of you." It's the bread and cup we share for nourishment and renewal, for hope and strength to face into the struggle to be faithful disciples.

Now at the foot of the cross, I ask on behalf of all of us – “What is Jesus’ death on the cross all about?” This week especially, it is worth taking time to ponder, pray and mull over this question with God. For me, the cross is about the power of self-giving love, embodied in Jesus’ giving himself over to God in trust, emptying himself, becoming a servant, because this is what God asked of him, for the sake of the world. The cross is about redemption because Jesus chose and walked the way of non-violent resistance, the way of suffering love, even as the shadows around him on Friday grew darkest from noon to three. Surrender. Self-sacrificing love meeting the awful darkness, feeling God forsaken, facing the worst that fear, power and violence in humanity can unleash. Our worst meeting God’s best.

And the cross also means to me that there is no need to fear God. God freely gave us what was most precious – God’s own Son. **God will always be the source of love, light and life.** Horrific and ugly as it was for Jesus and the disciples, the cross means we don’t have to fear each other. We don’t have to be jealous of each other. We don’t have to compete and divide into sides of winners and losers, us and them, rich and poor, black and white. We don’t have to humiliate others to make ourselves feel and look good. We do not have to retaliate, hate, or kill, because Jesus showed God will help us choose a different way. It’s hard and will be costly. To follow Jesus is to choose a different way, the way of suffering, non-violent love.

And one thing more - the cross says to me, “Home is this way.” (*pointing to crucifix on wall next to pulpit*). The way home to God’s love is through the broken body and heart of Jesus, God’s Son.

Honestly, I don’t know what to do with all of this. But God does. I don’t get it, but I don’t have to because God does. I can’t figure this out. That’s okay. God has.

What’s left for us to do then, friends, is to walk, and watch, and wait. And wonder at this love. Amen.

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