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Matthew 26:14-27:66

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Psalms 31:9-16

Philippians 2:5-11

April 5, 2020

Palm Sunday

Here we are at the end of Week 3 of our collective quarantine and entering Holy Week. Maybe we aren't so much entering Holy Week as limping towards it. Trying to find something holy in this unfamiliar place. And, this year the idea of holiness may be precarious at best.

I thought it would be beneficial to start by simply stating the obvious: We wanted a different kind of Holy Week. And, so, maybe it's important that we take a moment to name our grief. To name what hurts so that we can faithfully move into the next few days even if we have to limp a little.

Let's open with Psalm 31 from our readings (with some added creative license) ...

⁹ Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also. I am scared, Lord. I am worried that I will lose my job and if I do, I don't know how I will take care of my family. How will I buy groceries? How will I pay my rent? My business is failing and I can't pay my employees.

¹⁰ For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away. I have been working ungodly hours taking care of others who are desperate for relief. I don't know if I can keep up my strength or my hope. My back aches. I'm tired and want to rest. But there are so many people and they keep coming and I don't know if we can help them all.

¹¹ I am the scorn of all my adversaries, a horror to my neighbors, an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me. It's hard to keep up appearances when I'm discouraged. I'm trying to get work done and trying to keep the kids busy while I am on conference calls but they are restless and all of their manners have fallen away with each television show I distract them with...hour after hour. I haven't combed my hair and I'm still in the sweat pants I have been wearing for three days.

¹⁴ But I trust in you, O Lord; I say, 'You are my God.' Sometimes, it's hard to find you, God, in the midst of this but I won't give up looking. I know that you are working through this time and through me. Help me to trust you more. Help me to remember that my life is in your hands.

As I read the Psalm over and over, I was reminded that we are not the first to call out to God in pain and we won't be the last. Adversity, trials and tribulations are deeply human experiences that strip away all that is superficial and forces us to focus on what is essential.

In many ways, that is the profound power of Holy Week, however we may encounter it, even if we didn't want this kind of Holy Week. It is the essential ability for us to trust in God no matter what we may face. And by our trust we allow ourselves to be led...through our hardship and through the darkness so that we may finally emerge stronger and more faithful, renewed by God's good grace.

When I think of Palm Sunday, and our entry into this holy time, I am reminded that this essential element of trusting where God may lead is worth our attention. This Sunday marks a moment of life-changing movement as Jesus enters into Jerusalem. Thousands of people are gathering in the city to observe Passover. They are coming from near and far. The streets are packed.

Jesus' followers, a ragtag bunch of folks, call out, "Hosanna, save us!" They had put all of their hope in this Messiah who was to lift them out of their oppression under Roman rule. They were suffering and Jesus was supposed to be their salvation, a new ruler who would right the wrongs and liberate them. That's the kind of Holy Week they were expecting. As the people crowd around Jesus, surely he could hear the Roman army in the background as Pilate was entering the city as well. Jesus' heart pounding, people clinging to him, Rome pressing in on him.

And in that moment, Jesus simply allowed himself to be led. He was led into the heart of the city where he would face the ultimate betrayal and persecution. As the world pressed in, Jesus kept going forward, into the unknown, following God's call the entire way.

He followed God straight into his betrayal and arrest. The people were devastated. All of their hopes destroyed. This wasn't the savior they anticipated. This wasn't the Holy Week they wanted. Instead of a joyous liberation, they were handed a crushing defeat. Jesus' would end up in the hands of Pilate.

Holy Week starts with this eager excitement as the palms are laid down and moves into utter, despairing darkness. And, God leads us there right into the heart of the story...to move through hardship and doubt; to be strong through the pain and courageous through the fear. God knows this isn't the kind of Holy Week anyone expected. But God calls us in and through the Holy Week we are given.

This year more than any other, Holy Week asks...will we allow ourselves to be led? Led into the unknown and uncertainty. Led into difficult decisions and exhausting days. Led into the stressful hours with restless children. Can we enter into each moment and say, "You are my God and I will trust in you?"

Keep your hearts open and your hope strong. Look for holiness where you haven't looked before. Discover new ways to allow yourself to be led and trust that God will give you grace to emerge more faithful, more compassionate, more loving than you ever expected.

I want too close with a Franciscan prayer that is so meaningful right now, especially as we move into a different kind of Holy Week. Let us pray.

"May God bless us with discomfort — discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that we may live deep within our hearts. May God bless us with anger — anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that we may work for justice, freedom, and peace. May God bless us with tears — tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, hunger, and war, so that we may reach out our hands to comfort them and turn their pain into joy. And may God bless us with foolishness — enough foolishness to believe that we can make a difference in this world, so that we can do what others claim cannot be done."
Amen.