

The Edge of Dread

Matthew 21:1-11

Palm/Passion Sunday, (April 5) 2020

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*There's a place between two stands of trees where the grass grows uphill
and the old revolutionary road breaks off into shadows
near a meeting-house abandoned by the persecuted
who disappeared into those shadows.*

I've walked there picking mushrooms at the edge of dread, ...

-Adrienne Rich, from "What Kind of Times Are These?"

For three years Jesus crisscrossed Galilee teaching, preaching, healing, feeding, showing people the good news of God's Way. He embodied who God was and incarnated what God wanted. People came by the multitudes to hear him, hoping to touch even the hem of his clothes as he walked by. They came sick, hungry, beaten-down, worn-out, and in despair looking for hope. They came to hear news. Good news! But not everyone – some came and didn't like what they heard. Some wouldn't or couldn't believe. And some, especially those with power, knew that he was a threat to their way of life. After three years Jesus was a controversial figure, to say the least.

Toward the end of those three years Jesus "set his face toward Jerusalem," as the Gospels tell us. He cinched his belt, took a deep breath, and walked straight toward Jerusalem, toward confrontation and conflict with the Systems of Domination, the Powers of religion, politics, and economics. Straight into the jaws of Sin and Death.

It was Passover in Jerusalem and the thousands of pilgrims coming to the city spent millions of dollars making this the most lucrative week of the year. This was big business, but hundreds of small businesses relied on the pilgrims, too. Everyone in business knew that this week either made them or broke them. They needed a smooth week where everything went well, and people spent their money. What they did not need was a trouble-making country preacher from Galilee stirring things up.

Religion thrived this week, too. The great Temple Herod had built was packed. The tall steeple preachers did their thing and people sang psalms, prayed, and bought their sacrificial animals and made sacrifice. What the preachers did not need was a non-credentialed preacher from Galilee showing up and disrupting the religion industry they had going.

For the politicians, specifically the Roman Empire's administration of Gov. Pontius Pilate, it was a tense week. Judea was a place of unrest with rebellion always just beneath the surface, and with thousands of strangers crowding into the city, who knew what might happen – rebellion, assassination, demonstrations, protests, and beyond that theft, pickpockets, robbery, murder, fights, and on and on? Gov. Pilate came to Jerusalem from his headquarters in Caesarea with extra troops to enforce law and order. The Romans believed the lid was close to blowing and only a firm hand and a show of force could keep everyone in-line. His intelligence agents had warned that they believed this Jesus of Nazareth, a teacher whom many people were beginning to look to for revolution and change, might be coming to town this very week. So, Pilate decided he needed to be there personally. He rode into town in a great convoy of troops marching in cadence,

their armor gleaming, flags waving, trumpets blaring and drums beating. If there was going to be rebellion, he was going to be more than ready to stop it, and he wanted everyone to know it.

At the same time, Zealots and other freedom fighters or terrorists (depending on your perspective), came to Passover hoping to foment revolution. They smuggled in their knives and swords, stockpiled their weapons, held secret meetings, gave each other secret signs and passwords, and worked and waited for the right moment to strike against the hated imperial government.

In the midst of all this, came the Jewish pilgrims, many of whom had dreamed of coming to Jerusalem their whole lives. They came from all over the Mediterranean world and when they entered the city they entered a wondrous world of noise, dust, music, shouting, animals, people jostling, smells of food mixed with the smells of unwashed people and animals, and constant talk: “Mother, look! Look at that!” “I want one! I want one! Can I have one?!” “Where’s Zach? Anyone see Zach? I told him to stay next to me!” As they approached the hilltop where one could see the Temple, you could hear people crying, “There it is! There is the Temple! Thank you, God, I’ve finally seen it.”

According to the Gospels, a topic of conversation in the city was this teacher from out in Galilee, Jesus of Nazareth, who rumor said, was something exceptional. Gossip said he might come to town, and lots of people were calling him not just a teacher, but a full-fledged prophet. Some even wondered if he might be more than that. Some wondered if this might be the week that changed everything! Many of the Zealots, along with lots of disgruntled and worn-out people with little hope, pinned what hopes they had on this prophet Jesus. Maybe

he would start the rebellion that would run Pilate and his Romans out of town and therefore, make Jerusalem great again.

So, Jesus approached the city from Bethany and Bethphage, and comes to the Mount of Olives overlooking the Kidron Valley and the city beyond. The distance is about the same with the valley before him, as if you stood about where Raguet Street and the new traffic light is, looking eastward down Austin Street, down toward the Post Office, and then up the hill toward here. So, Jesus pauses at the top of the hill.

He has sent ahead two disciples to get him a donkey. He says, “If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them,’ and he will send them immediately” (Matt. 21:3). Sounds like strange instructions to me and some New Testament scholars have wondered if it was a kind of code and that the animals tied and ready to go, were already arranged for. Who knows?

Jesus stands on the Mount of Olives with entire Jerusalem in front of him. Jerusalem, which means “city of peace,” is in turmoil, says Matthew. Literally, it is “shaken” like an earthquake, with all that’s going on. New Testament scholar, Tom Long, wrote, “The whole city of Jerusalem shook with fear when Jesus was born (Matt. 2:3); it will shake with apocalyptic dread and hope at his death (Matt. 27:51-54), (Thomas G. Long, *Matthew: Westminster Bible Companion*, p. 233).

Luke says that as Jesus looked at this tumultuous city of peace, he wept (Luke 12:41). Jesus knew in his gut what was going on in the city and what the city faced. And he knew deep in his heart what he was facing, and he dreaded it.

My own personal interpretation is that Jesus did not know everything that was about to happen this week, but I do think he knew generally what he was facing and what was going on in the city. Jesus knew that the city and the people had a chance. They could listen to God, return to God, and take up the way of God Jesus was teaching. They could do it. Already there were significant crowds listening to him. Already there was momentum. Maybe the whole city would wake up and live into their name as the city of peace?

But... probably not. Crowds can be fickle, and the Powers of Sin and Death are fierce. And oh, there was so much money and power already mobilizing against him – public relation firms and polished, well-rehearsed TV and social media personalities, reporters and commentators, respected city officials and important religious leaders all giving their views that Jesus and his way was a threat to their Jerusalem way of life. Jesus knew, felt it in his bones, that when he stepped forward it was going to be hard; to take the next step down the valley into the city was to walk right into the belly of the beast. It meant conflict and confrontation, intrigue and betrayal. It meant suffering, torture, and death. He did not want to do this, but he knew he must do this. He knew he was born for this moment, but he knew it was going to be costly, even costing his own life. Oh, this was hard, and oh, how he dreaded it. He agonized. He grieved. He hurt. He wept.

I've been following the website, billmoyers.com, and the "a poet a day," in which a different poet each day reads one of their own poems. Wendell Berry was featured earlier, as well as Adrienne Rich with her poem, "What Kind of Times Are These," which caught my attention. She writes of "picking mushrooms on the edge of dread." I will not go into the poem, though I encourage you to go to billmoyers.com and read it for yourself.

“The edge of dread” is an image I think captures exactly what Jesus was facing. Here he was standing on the Mount of Olives, on the edge of the city with Herod’s great temple in the distance. Here he was on the edge of dread, on the edge of hope, on the edge of turmoil, on the edge of suffering, on the edge of sacrifice. What will Jesus do? And for those of us who follow him, what will we do?

Jesus crosses the edge of dread and enters into the dread. He faces suffering, cinches his belt, and walks right into it.

Cambridge theologian David Ford says that entering into suffering is like walking a “knife-edge.” On one side is a kind of passivity that glorifies suffering as something good in itself. On the other side, is a kind of activity that strives for comfort and control and wants a world without risk. In between, is the narrow path. Ford continues, “There comes a point when the questions change. Then we no longer ask about how to avoid a particular suffering or even why it is happening to us. Instead, all our resources are focused on how we might come through it, and our ultimate question becomes... What is it for? The basic trust is that suffering, evil, and even death do not have the last word about life” (David F. Ford, *The Shape of Living: Spiritual Directions for Everyday Life*, p. 168).

Jesus was no passive recipient of suffering and evil. At the same time, he did not try to control it. He did not call down “ten thousand angels” as the old song said. He chose the narrow path. Again, New Testament scholar Tom Long, “At the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, the devil had tempted Jesus to throw himself off of the temple confident that God would send angels to break his fall (Matt. 4:5-6). Instead, Jesus throws himself into the temple, into the teeth of those who would destroy him, and no angels are sent to rescue him” (Long, p. 232).

Jesus crosses the edge of dread, enters into suffering, because he trusts there is more going on than just what we see on the surface. Sin and Death, suffering and darkness do not have the last word. God is at work. This does not mean God causes the suffering. It simply means that God is at work in it and through it and will not allow evil to triumph. Sometimes we cannot avoid suffering. The only way is through it.

But we do not go through it alone. We know that Christ has suffered and endured all that we will suffer and endure. He knows all our sorrows. He's been there. And on the cross, this very week, with arms outstretched, he will embrace all Sin and Death can throw at him and absorb it, take it, but somehow redeem it.

I think he does all this because he trusts God is at work. I personally do not think Jesus knew with absolute certainty that God would resurrect him. I think Jesus crossed the edge into dread and suffering, into death on the cross, with the trust that God was at work.

And so do we.

My friend Chuck Rush, is the outstanding pastor of Christ Church in Summit, New Jersey, who wrote in an email this week: "I've been listening to the Doctors at our hospital describe the overwhelming conditions of our ICU because I'm on the Board at the Hospital and on the Ethics committee. It is really not good and people aren't getting off the ventilators like we'd hoped they would, so the system is about to hit max... It is a lot of stress to absorb... The volunteer people have organized and they canvass the houses of worship wondering if we can serve as daycare for hospital staff? Can we be a testing center? Can we take sick people on cots? Can we....?????" So Chuck gets on a conference call with his church leadership. People are nervous, stressed, not sure if they should volunteer or not

because of liability and on and on. At the same time, they want to help. He said, “So I write the volunteer people back and say that we can do just about anything that needs to be done. Give me something specific and we’ll make it happen... I’m open to discussion but sometimes you just have to start pedaling and see where you go...” (email to me, April 3, 2020).

Chuck’s right. Sometimes we just have to start pedaling, take the next step and see where it will go.

We live in uncertain times. Right now, we are called to stay home but who knows where it will all lead. Wherever we go, remember that we are not alone. Jesus walks with us.

Our own Judy Patch this week sent me this from poet Mary Oliver: *On the outskirts of Jerusalem the donkey waited./ Not especially brave, or filled with understanding, he stood and waited . . . // Never had he seen such crowds! And I wonder if he at all imagined/ what was to happen. Still, he was what he had always been: small, dark, obedient.// I hope, finally, he felt brave./ I hope, finally, he loved the man who rode so lightly upon him,/ as he lifted one dusty hoof and stepped, as he had to, forward* (from “The Poet Thinks about the Donkey”).

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.