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“Entering in the Passion of God”

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Passion/Palm Sunday (Year A)

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Psalm 31: 9–16, Matthew 21:1–11, Philippians 1:27–2:13

Holy Week has begun. Once again Christians around the world enact the passion of their Lord in the days before Easter. Palm branches grace the grasp of worshippers. Donkeys are pressed into service. Christian versions of the Jewish Passover meal are celebrated. Faith communities gather to receive the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday. Disciples wash one another’s feet. The burden of the cross is shouldered through city streets. The faithful follow the Stations of the Cross. The Seven Last Words of Jesus find voice. Tenebrae steals away the light into darkness. The tomb is sealed. Vigils of prayer are observed in the silence of Holy Saturday.

Christians around the world again enact the passion of their Lord. And each unique observance provides a doorway to comprehend more fully the height and breadth and depth and length of God’s redemptive love in Jesus Christ.

How might you and I enter in to God’s passion, God’s yearning and suffering love and aching heart for this world?

One popular way that many ministers and practitioners of the spiritual life suggest to enact the Passion of Holy Week is to focus on our own culpability: we examine ourselves and pinpoint our own failures and sins, our denials and betrayals. This certainly unfolds one aspect of God’s long-suffering and redemptive act in the cross of Christ. Yet there are other ways beyond a narrow individual and

introspective experience, ways that shift us toward a widescreen human experience played out on the vistas of history.

The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Christian community at Philippi, proposes another way. It is a way related to suffering, to sacrifice, to service.

Paul writes to the Philippians, saying, “For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict which you saw and now hear to be mine” (Philippians 1:29–30).

Later in chapter 3, Paul continues: “For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him..., that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death...” (Philippians 3:8b–10)

Suffering, sacrifice, service. It is the dirty little secret of the Christian faith.

Suffering, sacrifice, service. These words are the antithesis of what sells modern Christianity.

Many contemporary church leaders offer enticements to get folks to join. These offers are typically self-serving and beneficial for the potential members. They include immunity to pain, insurance against trouble, an unambiguous ethical and political program, assurance of personal significance.

Now it is easy for me to castigate other churches for “selling the faith” but in some form or fashion, we all do it. We strive to be friendly and welcoming; we offer the best children’s and youth programs; even our mission of helping others is tailored to attract the civic-minded.

Yet the dirty little secret hidden by most in the modern church has always been proudly proclaimed by the saints of the New Testament. It serves as a badge of honor and a privilege of high calling. In Acts 5, it says the disciples rejoiced “that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name” of Jesus. In Romans,

the church hears that they are children of God and heirs with Christ in their suffering (Romans 8:16–17).

In 2 Corinthians, the church is assured that as they share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, they share abundantly in his comfort as well (2 Corinthians 1:5). Later in 2 Corinthians, Paul concludes: "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10).

The writer of 1 Peter warns disciples, "Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same thought... Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you as though something strange were happening. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings..." (1 Peter 4:1, 12–13).

The prophets of the Old Testament, Jesus in the Gospels, the Apostles in Acts and the Epistles—all of them bring a consistent message, even if it is not a popular one. It is an invitation to suffering, sacrifice, and service. It is a calling without a guaranteed simple and pleasurable outcome. The only benefits offered are the promised presence of Christ and perhaps a joy or peace that attends his presence.

One way of understanding the passion of this day with Jesus entering Jerusalem to the clamor of a crowd is to see it as a protest march. Jesus brings his message of the kingdom of God to the heart of the religious and political establishment in Jerusalem.

He challenges human and spiritual powers that rob humanity of dignity and life. Jesus enters knowing that his death is imminent but will bring the downfall of death and sin to control the lives of people. What appears as a certain and permanent condition of human life, Jesus makes conditional and temporary.

Passion can be understood as both desire and suffering. To be passionate is to desire something so deeply that one willingly engages struggle and pain in order to reach the fulfillment of that desire. God's passion for humanity is such that God willingly engages, to the point of sacrifice and suffering, in order to reach humanity. Such is the love of God seen in Jesus Christ. It is a grace beyond human

imagination, much less beyond human attainment. It is a gift: first, last, foremost. And at the same time, God invites people to enter that passion.

You and I observe such passion from time to time.

It was about 2 years ago now. My youngest son's friend Thomas was involved in an auto accident that left him close to death with a severe brain injury. He remained unconscious for a month. Thomas went through a grueling recovery in rehab to regain what the accident had robbed him of: awareness, the use of his hands and feet, speech, logical thought, emotion.

During his recovery at the hospital, his mother, Lucy, remained at his bedside almost constantly. She was passionate about getting him well and functioning at the highest level possible. It became her life work.

Lucy claimed she was not a natural in such a role, but she learned what she needed to assist getting her son well. Her presence in the Neuro-ICU and Rehab Wing proved not intrusive nor demanding for the nursing staff and therapists; in fact, she became one of the team.

While the family is always a desired ally in recovery, the degree to which they prove helpful varies significantly. The fact that Lucy became one of the team members is rare. If you don't believe me, ask any nurse you know who works in the ICU.

We would visit Thomas in the hospital. For those of us uncomfortable about how to communicate while in his presence, Lucy modeled what to do. When we were unable to discern meaning through his eye movements, she translated. Of course she celebrated and shared with us when he first opened his eyes, when he squeezed her hand in response to a question, when he took his first step, when he cracked his first joke.

Lucy understood passion; she knew about desire and suffering and how they intertwined.

A year and a half later her son is well on the road to recovery. Even though it was a year late, last fall Thomas matriculated through UNC Chapel Hill. He will finish his first year there in May.

A couple of months ago, Lucy heard about another young man in a Charlotte hospital with a brain injury. She went to visit and ended up returning over and over again to be with the family until he was finally discharged to another facility out of town just recently.

Suffering, sacrifice, and service.

From a jail cell where the Apostle Paul could understandably be preoccupied by the outcome of his own legal proceedings, he engages the struggles and concerns of the Philippians. He encourages them to see in their own struggles for faith and faithfulness the very passion of God.

“Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3–4).

I know of no more strenuous personal battles than these: the struggle against self-centeredness, the struggle for humility, and the struggle to maintain concern for others.

All of life’s relationships are to be qualified on the basis of being of the same mind as Jesus Christ. “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.... [H]e humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:5–8).

It is this attitude, this quality of spirit, this approach to life that is to permeate the Christian community.

Suffering, sacrifice, service.

Suffering is a tough sell. Annie Dillard, in her wonderful and terrifying book, *For the Time Being*, quotes statistical figures and provides individual vignettes about suffering that are beyond comprehension. During my lifetime, the following tragedies happened, and I was unaware of their scope. In 1976, an earthquake in Tangshan killed 750,000 people. In 1991, 138,000 were drowned in Bangladesh. In 1994, Rwandan Hutus killed 800,000 Tutsis in one hundred days. And since the year 2000, there has been tsunamis and earthquakes and hurricanes that have killed another half million.

Human suffering and need are so overwhelming, and we cannot begin to fathom its extent. We are numbed, and we quickly forget. We turn away from such overwhelming need and suffering.

It is so much easier to focus on ourselves: on our needs, on our failures, on our opportunities, on our little worlds. Perhaps that is why so many of us are bored. Our desires, our passions are too small, too shallow, too limited.

In a world of such tremendous need, how can we be bored? Only if we live in denial or are willingly deceived can we be deprived of a great burden for others.

The words of Paul challenge us. “Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus...”

So on this Palm Sunday I want to remind you of the opportunity to enter God’s passion during Holy Week. And then I remembered: you already know. You are practicing it on a daily basis.

I have seen it. I’ve been watching you! I’ve heard the stories you tell.

Children caring for parents, some at home, some in nursing facilities, some many miles from here. Not only are you attending the needs of your own parents, but

some of you see others who have no one, and in your care, you have adopted them, check in on them, extending love and help and care.

The care for critically ill children and spouses. Calling on people within this church community, and beyond, who may be isolated, who need transportation, who need the assurance that they have not been forgotten.

Others of you engage in providing a place within this community for the young or needy to grow and flourish. A preschool that engages children from all sectors of society in providing a solid foundation for learning which is a gift that will serve countless children throughout their lives. AA programs where people struggling to maintain sobriety have an anchor, a consistent place to come in the midst of their volatile lives.

Many of you are involved in so many ways to better peoples' lives. And always there are frustrations with results, with people who get in the way rather than contribute. Yet you don't give up when it would be easier to walk away.

Suffering, sacrifice, and service.

Something redemptive happens when strangers are treated as family, when prisoners become fellow cellmates, when the hurt of the abused becomes our hurt.

It is the presence of Christ who shares in the burdens of our neighbors and of our own burdens, and carries them into the heart of love for redress and resolution and redemption.

This Holy Week, we are all invited to enter in the passion of God. You see, the task of an Easter people is to enter into those continuing places of darkness and suffering to bring light and life. When we enter the passion of God, we participate in the redemption of Christ for this entire world.