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## “Obedient unto Death”

A sermon by Sam R. Miglarese

Passion/Palm Sunday (Year B)

March 29, 2015

Isaiah 50: 4-9; Philippians 2: 5-11; Mark 14:32–15:39

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This week, our Holy Week, we walk with Jesus. Many of you did it literally from one church to the other during the Palm Sunday neighborhood Procession. We walk with Jesus from his glorious, triumphant entry in Jerusalem to his sad, lonely death on the cross. The words, “Hosanna to the highest!” and “Crucify him!” are mingled together on this Passion Sunday. In some ways, they encapsulate the meaning of this whole week we call Holy Week. We walk with Jesus from his glorious entrance in Jerusalem to his death on the cross.

The Gospel account from Mark is stark. It captures the humanness of Jesus in a very real way. His death, like so many other human deaths, is sad and lonely.

As I listened to the particular text today from Mark, I can’t help but be moved the most by the way in which he was betrayed—not once, but three times, he was betrayed. He was betrayed by one of his disciples, **Judas**, who handed him over to the authorities for a small amount of money. He was denied by one of his disciples, **Peter**, who was consistently entrusted with being the rock but who denied him three times, vehemently: “I do not know the man!” And just a few hours earlier, he had promised fidelity and complete loyalty to Jesus. And then finally, the **crowd**, fickle though they are: one moment, they’re singing Hosanna, and within a few days, they demanded his death with “Crucify him!” selecting a robber/murderer, Barabbas, instead of this Jesus.

Human death is a reality that we all have to face. In the world in which we live, all around this world there are violent, war-torn conflicts on the streets of the Middle East: in Yemen, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, where people are innocently killed, collateral damage, for purposes that many of us still do not understand. Then the suicide/murder of 150 on that Germanwings airliner. And we get news of those who are sick; we get news of diagnoses that are terminal; we know about hospitals and nursing homes; we know about hospice care, and death on streets of our own city. Jesus died a miserable death, painful and humiliating, abandoned by all but a few persons. He died the death that many people die.

What makes Jesus' death different is that his death destroyed death. His death is a saving death. In the famous speech of Martin Luther King, "I have a dream," many of us forget to remember the words in the middle of that sermon where he said, "Unmerited suffering is salvific." If you add the words, "borne in love"—"Unmerited suffering borne in love is salvific"—in a very brief turn of phrase, King captures the meaning of Jesus' death that is so different than all of the deaths that have come before us and will go ahead of us. It was a saving death. Jesus destroyed death. So his dying teaches us how to live, and his death is a sign of God's love for us, raised on high that draws all men, women, and children near to him.

The death of every man is a sign and witness but its meaning is too often unclear. We all know about the death of old age, and so often, we look upon their deaths as a fulfillment, of a life well lived. We know about the death of heroes who inspire us, whether it's political like John Kennedy or civil rights like Dr. King or religious like Bonhoeffer or Oscar Romero—those deaths inspire because their deaths offer a meaning to their sacrifice that is authentic. There is a singular fidelity where their energy and goodness is cut short. And then there are the inexplicable deaths—the death of our infants, the death of our children—that leave deep holes in our hearts.

And yet, in the midst of all that, the message of this Holy Week is that our Jesus died for us, walks before us, and invites us in to be one with his death and resurrection. In some ways, it can be the resolution to the mystery and ambiguity each person faces as they confront their own mortality. Christ Jesus has died, is risen, and will come again.

I remember the words at the table of the Lord when we hold up the cup and say, “This is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven. Do this action in my memory because what I have done for you is a reality that will last forever. I offer you victory over death. I offer you life-giving hope in the way in which we walk in this world and face the next. I offer you freedom of trust and love. I have conquered the world.”

You heard in Philippians about taking on the mind of Christ that we might no longer live, but now we must have Christ live in us. So what is offered to us in this week we call holy is not mourning, sadness, or anguish. It is something that meets our deepest need, our deepest thirst, our quest for life: a victory over sin and death so that we might together say with confidence and conviction the very words of the centurion that ended our hearing of the Passion as he faced this Jesus dying on the cross. As Jesus breathed his last, may we say with him: “Truly, this man was God’s Son.” He is our saving Lord.

Influences: Martin Luther King, Jr.

Louis J. Cameli

Florence McDow