

Natalie W. Bell
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Palms to Passion

Matthew 21:1-11, 27:11-54 selections

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately."^[a] ⁴ This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet:

*⁵ "Tell the daughter of Zion,
 Look, your king is coming to you,
 humble and mounted on a donkey,
 and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."*

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷ they brought the donkey and the colt and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸ A very large crowd^[b] spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

"Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

-----Matthew 27--selections

Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You say so." ¹² But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer.¹⁵ Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. ¹⁶ At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. ¹⁷ So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" ¹⁸ For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. ²⁰ Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. ²¹ The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." ²² Pilate said to them, "Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" All of them said, "Let him be crucified!" ²³ Then he asked, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!" ²⁴ So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd,

saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." 25 Then the people as a whole answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" 26 So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified. ...28 They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, 29 and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" 30 They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. 31 After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him. 32 As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross. 33 And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), ...35 And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; ...37 Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." 38 Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. 39 Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads 40 and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." 41 In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, 42 "He saved others; he cannot save himself. ... 45 From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. 46 And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, ["Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is,]"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"50 Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. 51 At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split.54 Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

Today we remember **Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem**, and how the people shouted **Hosanna**, and waved branches and put their coats on the ground for him, as he rode in on a humble donkey. It's why we celebrate today as **Palm Sunday**.

But we also remember that in that same week, Jesus was unfairly arrested, tortured, and crucified on a cross. The people who shouted Hosanna on Palm Sunday, shouted **Crucify Him on Good Friday**. So we also celebrate this as **Passion Sunday**, Passion—meaning, suffering.

One reason the Church recognizes this
 as ***Palm to Passion Sunday is because not everyone comes to worship***
 for ***Maundy Thursday and Good Friday***
 and if you go from the story of palm branches,
 to the empty tomb on Easter, you've ***missed*** something very important—
 namely, ***the cross***.

When we hear the ***whole story*** of Holy Week,
 We really appreciate
 The Easter ***resurrection***.
 And that whole story ***includes the cross***.

The cross is a part of the story that we would like to avoid.
 It was such a ***gruesome*** death that reportedly
 Romans wouldn't even speak of it publicly in Jesus' day.
 The Gospels themselves do not dwell on the details of the crucifixion,
 but they do detail the ***meaning and power*** of the cross.

As Christians, we believe that the ***cross*** is ***essential*** to who Jesus is,
 and to who we are as Christians.
 I once read about a pastor
 who ***didn't preach*** on the cross
 because it's such a downer.

But what if we are really ***hungry to understand*** the cross?
 Because we see the brokenness of our world, everyday!
 All of us ***experience suffering***, we witness evil and heartache,
 and we ***struggle*** to understand it, don't we?
 Don't we ever wonder where God is, in the midst of this messy world?

The cross is a reminder that God is right in the middle of it.
God is in the midst of all pain, all suffering.

In his powerful book entitled, ***Night, holocaust survivor Elie Weisel*** witnesses the
 hanging of a young boy by the Nazis in the concentration camp.
 Someone cries out behind him, *Where is God, now?*
Where is God? Where is He?"*For more than half an hour [the child in the*
noose] stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under
our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face....

*Behind me, I heard the same man asking:
 “Where is God now?”
 And I heard a voice within me answer him:
 “Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows. . . .*

The cross reminds us that ***God is in our suffering.***
That Jesus himself is in it, because he has experienced it.

So many people in this story of the Passion, do what we try to do.
 They ***avoid*** the crucifixion.
 Most of Jesus’ ***disciples*** abandon him.
 It’s the women who witness his death on the cross.

Pilate literally washes his hands of the whole conviction of Jesus—
 leaving the awful death to others to carry out.

This is what we do.
 We try to ***AVOID pain and suffering.***
 But the more we live, the more we cannot do that.
 We all come face to face with suffering.

But didn’t ***Jesus come to take away pain?***
 Think of all the people he healed—
 the blind, the lame, the lepers, the demon-possessed.

So why would Jesus die on a cross,
 And why would he say things like ***follow me, and take up your cross?***

Why would Paul in ***Philippians 2*** talk about Jesus being obedient—
 to the point of death on a cross?
 Why would Christian saints like Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer say
 that to follow Christ means ***to come and die?***

Maybe because we ***need the MEANING*** of the cross.
 It’s such a ***countercultural*** image though, isn’t it?
 We live in a society with ***slogans about happiness***, and pain-free life.

We hear things like:
*Live your best life now, You deserve a break,
 You’ve waited long enough, you’re in good hands.*

Our culture wants to *make pain and suffering go away!*
 Our goal is to feel good, not bad.
 So why would we *NEED the cross?*

After all, *Jesus said he wanted us to have JOY.*
 And he worked to alleviate suffering.
 But he ALSO said *take up your cross!*
 He said it, and he himself *did it.*

So where's the *good news* in that?
 Does God want to *take AWAY* our suffering?
 Or have us *enter INTO it?*
 Did Jesus *have to die such an unjust* death?

We just heard in Matthew that even *Pilate and his wife*
 knew that Jesus was innocent.
 People knew he was without blame.

But he *DID die* on the cross.
 And during this Holy Week,
 we are called to remember the *reality, meaning, and power* of the cross.
 Because there is *no Easter, without the cross.*

Over centuries, the church has found *layers of meaning* in the cross—
 Just like the layers of meaning in the life of Jesus.
 The cross is Jesus bringing *forgiveness and amazing grace,*
 it's Jesus *taking on our sins* so that we might be free from them,
 it's Jesus *defeating the power of sin and death*—so that we could be forgiven and
 have new and eternal life.
 These are all known as theories of *atonement*—
 ways we understand the cross.

But there's *more.*
 The cross says something about our *suffering.*
 I'm sure you've heard people say, that's the *cross I have to bear.*
 They speak of the cross as a symbol of suffering.

But Jesus' death on the cross was a *PARTICULAR type* of suffering--
 He didn't suffer for the *sake of suffering.*
 And we don't believe that *any suffering is like* Jesus dying on the cross.

Jesus' suffering *did something more* than end his life.
 It was a death, that *led to NEW LIFE*.
 What if that's a word we need today?

David Brooks once wrote an article entitled: "*What Suffering Does*".
 He wrote: "When people remember the past, they don't only talk about happiness.
 It is often the *ordeals* that seem most significant.
 People shoot for happiness but *feel formed through suffering*.
 Happiness wants you to think about maximizing your benefits in life.
 Difficulty and suffering sends you on a different course.
 ... suffering drags you deeper into yourself.

In fact, the theologian *Paul Tillich* wrote that people who endure suffering are taken beneath the routines of life and find they are not who they believed themselves to be. The agony involved in, say, the grief of having lost a loved one smashes through what they thought was the bottom floor of their personality, revealing an area below, and then it smashes through that floor revealing another area.

For instance, Abraham *Lincoln* suffered through the pain of a civil war, and he ... emerged with this sense that ...he was an instrument for transcendent tasks.
 Brooks said that in suffering, some people start to feel a call....

"The right response to this sort of pain is not pleasure.
It's HOLINESS... trying to redeem something
 bad by turning it into something *sacred*.
 Some parents who've lost a child start foundations.
 Some prisoners in the concentration camps rededicated themselves to the hopes and expectations of their loved ones",

Brooks said, "Recovering from suffering is not like recovering from a disease. Many people don't come out healed; they *come out DIFFERENT....*"
 David Brooks, *The New York Times*, Saturday April 12, 2014.

What if that's *true, for all of us?*
 What if the best response to suffering is *redemption?*
 And what if the cross of Christ brings about such redemption?

What if, miraculously, *suffering can lead to LIFE*—
 The kind of life we didn't know we could find in the midst of pain.

The kind of life that has meaning way beyond ourselves.
The kind of life that transforms other people's lives.

Does this make all suffering GOOD?

No.

Some suffering creates more pain and bitterness, more brokenness.

Brooks wrote in 2021 that *suffering can make people self-centered, loveless, humorless and angry.*

But we all know cases where suffering didn't break people, but broke them open—made them more caring toward and knowledgeable about the suffering of others.

Thornton Wilder once said: "Without your wound where would your power be?"

David Brooks, "What Do You Say to the Sufferer", *The New York Times*, Friday Dec 10, 2021.

By the grace of God, some suffering is ***transformative.***

Sometimes, pain changes us—for the best.

And sometimes the ***pain of doing God's will,***

and suffering for justice and goodness,

Leads to new ***life.***

Who do you know who has suffered, for ***the good?***

When have you seen people walk right into suffering, ***in order to bring life?***

When have we seen people ***defending others*** by putting their own lives on the line?

When have we seen people ***blowing the whistle*** on injustice?

Or ***making sacrifices*** to serve the least of these?

On the cross Jesus took on all the sin and suffering of the world,

The crucifixion represents the ***reality of pain*** in our world.

What if Jesus took it all on himself so that we would understand exactly ***where***

God is in this broken, sinful, suffering world.

God is right **HERE WITH US.**

We focus as a church on the empty cross and the empty tomb,

but we ***cannot skip the crucifixion,***

or we've missed the point of God's grace!

If we skip from the Palms to the empty tomb,

we miss the ***reason for Easter joy!***

Theologian *Fleming Rutledge* wrote about the cross.
 She said that in the crucifixion Jesus took on everything that is evil and suffering,
 and if we only hear about the resurrection on Easter morning,
 we have no sense of anything being *defeated or redeemed*.
 We need to know *WHAT is being redeemed*—it is *US*.
 An interview with Fleming Rutledge, *Why the Cross?*, Christianity Today, March 2016, pg. 38-39.

That's really what the *cross is all about*.
 God comes into our broken world, so full of pain and sin and evil,
 and Jesus brings *redemption*.
 It's *not perfect just yet*, but one day as the book of Revelation reminds us,
 Death and crying and pain will be no more,
 God will dry every tear from our eyes
 and all things will be made new.

Friends, today *Good News of the Gospel*,
 Is found in the *cross*—
 The place where *sin and suffering have been redeemed*.

And now, as we enter this *Holy Week*...
 I pray that we would *travel with Christ*,
 Through his last supper on *Maundy Thursday*,
 Through his crucifixion on *Good Friday*...
 And finally, to the *Empty tomb*.
 But today, let us give thanks, for the gift of the *cross*,
 And all God's people can say together, Amen.