

Update from the Protestant Chaplain -- Palm Sunday

April 5, 2020

Good morning,

Today is Palm Sunday, the day that Christians celebrate the beginning of a series of events that came between the end of Jesus' public ministry and his resurrection on Easter Sunday. These events between Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday are the focus of Christian reflection during Holy Week.

Holy Week begins with reflections on Palm Sunday, the event where Jesus enters into Jerusalem to a cheering crowd of people. This event follows nearly three years of Jesus' teaching and healing ministry where he was also teacher and mentor to a group of disciples. Before this triumphal entry, Jesus' closest twelve disciples were concerned about Jesus' safety. The disciples were trying to convince Jesus to avoid those who were trying to kill him. They seemed to have forgotten that Jesus warned them that he was going to be taken and killed and this was God's plan. While eleven of them were trying to protect Jesus, one of the disciples was working with the religious leaders to arrest Jesus and bring him for trial and execution. Jesus did not seem concerned with the disciples' fears or one of the disciple's betrayal. Instead, Jesus instructed his disciples to find a place to stay and to prepare for Passover.

Toward the end of Holy Week is Maundy Thursday, the day Christians reflect on Jesus' command to his disciples to love each other. Jesus issued his command during his last dinner with his disciples before his arrest, trial and execution. Good Friday is the reflection on this brutal and cruel execution. Easter Sunday is the reflection on Jesus' resurrection.

It is strange preparing for Holy Week in isolation and during a pandemic. I have so many memories of wonderful gatherings during past Holy Week. I am a bit sad that these gatherings will not happen this year. But this is for the best, for sheltering in place and maintaining social distance will save lives so I am content to stay inside, although I did go out yesterday to collect a palm from the local Episcopal Church that was left outside the building in a vase.

Instead of gathering with others, I have been looking on the internet, reading about how others are processing our present situation as people in the middle of a global pandemic. This week I would like to reflect on two words that have surfaced a lot on the internet in regard to the coronavirus crisis: fiasco and apocalypse.

Fiasco is defined as a process that ends in complete failure, usually in an embarrassing way. If you have time, a great story of fiascos may be found in this week's This American Life episode (titled Fiasco). This episode is hilarious, but it also puts fiasco in perspective. Fiascos are avoidable events that have a way of disrupting the social order on a small scale. I wonder, were the disciples trying to avoid Jesus' death or possibly an embarrassing situation? Were they afraid that their three-year adventure with Jesus was going to end with a fiasco? The disciples were so afraid of many things. But their fears did not stop the worst-case scenario from happening – their friend and teacher Jesus was arrested, tried and crucified. Did the disciples scatter out of fear of their own

lives or did everything just go a bit crazy? Was Peter's denial out of fear of his life or embarrassment over being associated with Jesus? Was Good Friday a fiasco or a personal apocalypse?

Apocalypses are rarely personal, and by definition, are far worse than fiascos. Apocalypses are wide scale calamities that affect entire communities. Fiascos are more personal and private and may change the social order on a small scale. But apocalypses are events that cause catastrophic destruction that upend entire societies. Some religious people view such destruction as judgement for something that has gone amiss by someone and something worthy of punishment. The New York Times published an article about the various ways religious people look at apocalypse (the article includes a quote from a Williams professor). The definition that rings true with me is apocalypse as an unveiling – a period when the disruption reveals something about our communities and ourselves that we did not notice during our neatly arranged and well-ordered lives.

Pandemics by its very nature are apocalyptic, however much of the rhetoric surrounding the current coronavirus crisis has more to do with saving face and assigning blame. Thousands of people are getting sick and dying but much of the discussion about COVID 19 is over who failed to do what and when, where are supplies coming from and why are those supplies not arriving where they are needed and which official failed to do this or that. The focus of these debates is about small numbers of people who may be embarrassed over a process that ended in failure. A few articles focus on the thousands of frontline workers who are heroically fighting to save thousands of lives or to help those who are sick and dying. Unfortunately, most of the discussions about the coronavirus treating the crisis like a political fiasco with occasional commercial breaks about the apocalypse.

Sometimes I think we are somewhere between a fiasco and an apocalypse. However, I do believe this space between these two phenomena is a kind of sacred space, where the social order is upended by experiences that are embarrassing, devastating and revealing. In this space, this disorder may be an ending, but it is also a beginning of a better understanding of yourself, your friends, family and loved ones and even God. The challenge is how to find ways to push away the fear and the blame, move through the grief that comes with loss of the way things used to be and embrace what we can learn in this liminal space. What will be unveiled for you during this Holy Week? Take time and space for quiet reflection as you reflect on all of the changes that are happening in our lives. Perhaps in these quiet movements of reflection, you find clarity, a time to pray and a time to connect with others (mostly online, of course).

Good luck as classes resume (online) this week. Let us know if there is anything we can do to support you during this time.

Rev. Valerie