

Steadfast
John 12:12-19

Palm Sunday/ 24th March 2024

Today, we walk with Jesus into Jerusalem and add our shouts of “Hosanna!” “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” “See our king is coming toward you.” The crowd shouts with joy, yet the moment is fraught with fear and unease. With Roman centurions looking on because it was Passover, for the city was always a powder keg at that time, the cheers of the crowd are charged with subversive meaning and political overtones. This day is bittersweet. It always is. We know what’s coming. We know the stories: Matthew’s and Mark’s, Luke’s and John’s. They each have their slant, their distinctive voice, with unique (even conflicting) chronologies and theological outlooks. This year, the lectionary favors John’s version, which comes on the heels of the raising of Lazarus (John 11) and the religious authorities troubled by what Jesus will do next in Jerusalem, the city of Yahweh’s shalom, Yahweh’s peace. Was there ever a city so misnamed?

Yes, we know what’s coming. Even after all these years, this text, these stories of that fateful week that changed the course of history, the questions remain, the answers difficult to discern. Why? For what? What did his suffering and death accomplish? What does it reveal to us about the nature of God?

One of the challenges facing us is that the New Testament doesn’t speak with one voice regarding the meaning of the cross. Even the creeds are silent. Not silent about the cross, but about what the cross *means*. Instead, the Church has given us metaphors, images, symbols, and various theologies of the cross to try to make sense of it all. But they all come up short because what occurred that week was bigger than any one metaphor, symbol, or meaning. It’s a story that we can never fully tell. Never will. History as a science does not have the power or the authority to bear such truth.¹ The American novelist Flannery O’Connor (1925-1964), a Roman Catholic, a person of deep faith and searing insight (today is her birthday), wrote, “What people don’t realize is how much religion costs. They think faith is a big electric blanket, when of course it is the cross. It is much harder to believe than not to believe.” She was a realist. She was not afraid to look at suffering—and she knew suffering. But suffering is never the whole story. “I can,” she said, “with one eye squinted, take it all as a blessing.”²

The New Testament gives us four gospel witnesses, but other witnesses also experienced that awful week, who walked with Jesus into Jerusalem and watched him confront the powers that seek to undo God’s way in the world. And so, we must attend to this story *lightly*, gently, without thinking that we know what it all means—because we don’t. Here and there, we are given glimpses of the truth and discover a new angle or perspective that allows us to see things about the story that we never noticed before. And sometimes, by the grace of God, we hear the story with an entirely different ear; we listen to the story with our souls and feel it and hear it as if for the first time.

On most Palm Sundays (including today), the last hymn we sing to take us into Holy Week is the hymn, “My Song is Love Unknown.” The text was first a poem by the English

Puritan minister Samuel Crossman (1623-1683), written in 1664 while England was enduring another plague outbreak. The tune was written in 1918 by the English composer John Ireland (1879-1962). One day, Ireland, at lunch with Geoffrey Shaw (1879-1943), a composer and Anglican church musician, was given a slip of paper by Shaw who said, "I want a tune for this lovely poem by Samuel Crossman." Ireland took the paper with the poem, picked up a menu, and then composed the tune on the back of it. In minutes, Ireland handed it back to Shaw with a casual remark: "Here is your tune."³

The tune and text work their magic on me every year and dig into my soul. The section that grips and grabs me and touches something deep in me occurs when tune and text come together toward the center of the hymn. About halfway through, Ireland intentionally deviates from the dominant or tonic key of D-Major. It's a technique called chromaticism, modulating out of the dominant key; it's a signature technique that Ireland loved to use. He breaks out of tonality, introduces dissonance, and destabilizes us, creating a moment of tension that hooks us. The companion text for this part of the tune, the dissonance in each verse, is:

...*O who am I That for my sake;*
...*But O my Friend, My Friend indeed; ...*
...*Then 'Crucify!' Is all their breath;*
...*Yet steadfast He To suffering goes;*
...*This is my Friend, In whose sweet praise*

It's that moment, at the heart of the hymn, at the heart of the text, it's these lines that keep repeating, again and again, in my head: *Yet steadfast he to suffering goes.*

That's my image of Palm Sunday as Jesus faces Jerusalem, knowing full well what he was doing. *Steadfast*. With unwavering commitment, he sets his face toward a city he knows will reject him, as it did to many prophets before him. With firm resolution, rooted and grounded in unfathomable love, he *chooses* to go this way. He chooses to suffer, to undergo what few of us are willing or able to endure. It's this act, this choice, this willful decision that's so remarkable and arrests us with awe. He doesn't go to conquer or defeat or annihilate or judge. He goes to suffer. *Not* to celebrate suffering for its own sake or glory in suffering. God forbid! Echoing Isaiah from long ago, Jesus is one who serves by suffering, a "suffering servant" (Isaiah 53), suffering *for*, suffering *with*, suffering *through* the pain and anguish of a broken world, a world of broken hearts, suffering the sorrow of a wayward humanity alienated from God's justice and love and hell-bent on self-destruction.

This is who God is. Not God omnipotent, blustering into the city with bravado, full of power and might, shock and awe, but a God who demonstrates a different kind of power, a power strong in weakness, as the Apostle Paul knew (2 Corinthians 12:9). As Paul wrote to the Philippians, "let the same mind (that is, way) be in you that was in Christ Jesus." Citing a hymn that would have been familiar to the Philippian church, Paul described the way of Christ:

*who, because he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited [or grasped],
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,*

*being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he [as God!] humbled himself
and became obedient
to the point of death – even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6-11)*

The Lord *chooses* to empty himself, to give himself completely, to surrender, a servant, steadfast, sure to suffering he goes, in love, even if love leads all the way to death, all the way to hell and back—and not just death, the excruciating, shameful dehumanizing death on a *cross*.

Years ago, in adult ed, we offered a deep dive into the meanings of the cross. The Lenten series was titled Cross Purposes. I shared two reflections from two people without a lot in common, the playwright Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) and the pastor-theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), writing from different centuries, from different professions, both in love with Christ, both writing from prison, in prison for very different reasons; both knew something about suffering.

In a letter Wilde called *De Profundis (Out of the Depths)*, from 1895, which was never published in his lifetime. Wilde's sister worked hard to prevent this letter from seeing the light of day. In this remarkable piece, Wilde shared what Christ had come to mean to him. Wilde compares Jesus to an artist who is tasked to give expression to those who cannot speak. "To [an artist] what is dumb is dead," Wilde said. "But to Christ it was not so. With a width and wonder of imagination that fills one almost with awe, [Christ] took the entire world of the inarticulate, the voiceless world of pain as his kingdom, and made of himself its eternal mouthpiece. Those... who are dumb under oppression and 'whose silence is heard only of God,' he chose as his brothers [and sisters]. He sought to become eyes to the blind, ears to the deaf, and a cry on the lips of those whose tongue had tied.... And feeling, with the artistic nature of one to whom Sorrow and Suffering were modes through which he could realize his conception of the Beautiful, that an idea is of no value till it becomes incarnate and is made an image, [Christ] made himself the image of the Man of Sorrows, and as such has fascinated and dominated Art as no Greek god ever succeeded in doing."⁴

Writing from Tegel prison in Berlin in 1945, Dietrich Bonhoeffer called those who followed him to be attentive to the presence of God not in the powerful but in the excluded, the maltreated, the powerless, oppressed, scorned, in short, the sufferers. He imagined what the church must be about after the war. Near the time of his execution in April 1945, he wrote, "God lets himself be pushed out of the world on the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which [God] is with us and helps us...*The Bible directs [us] to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help.*"⁵

Pro me. Bonhoeffer liked to say. All this was done, *Pro Me, For me.* And *Pro Nobis.* For us. Jesus suffers, *not* in our stead, not because he's taking the blows of an angry Father-Judge, blows we think we deserve—*No!* Instead, Jesus demonstrates with his life that *this* is who God is and what God is like. God suffers with us, identifies with our struggles and sorrows, participates in our pain, enters into our grief and shame and brokenness, and bears it all—because we can't!

In Christ, God takes on and undertakes Death to show that even Death has no power to separate us from God's presence. And this suffering, suffering through, paves the way to life, true life.

Yet, steadfast he to suffering goes. The dissonance at this point in the hymn is matched twice, with the image of Jesus as Friend. Two images inextricably linked: the friend who suffers. Jesus the friend, a true friend, who is with me all the way, all the way to hell and back, who suffers with me in all the dissonant and broken places of my life; Jesus our Friend who suffers – with us – and carries us along the way all the way, even to death, all the way, through death, and beyond.

*But O my Friend,
My Friend indeed,
Who at my need
His life did spend!*

*Yes, this is my Friend,
In whose sweet praise
I all my days
Could gladly spend.⁶*

¹Kenneth E. Kovacs, *The Relational Theology of James E. Loder: Encounter and Conviction* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 113 ff.

²Both O'Connor quotes are found in Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor* (New York: The Noonday Press/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979).

³Muriel Searle, *John Ireland, the Man and His Music* (Tunbridge Wells: Midas Books, 1979), cited in LindaJo H. McKim, *The Presbyterian Hymnal Companion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 72.

⁴Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*, cited in Anthony W. Bartlett, *Cross Purposes: The Violent Grammar of Christian Atonement* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2001), 177.

⁵Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Eberhard Bethge, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 360-361. Emphasis mine

⁶John Ireland, "My Song Is Love Unknown," *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990).