Sermon for Palm and Passion Sunday

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Sunday, March 25, 2018
Title: Finding our place

In my early twenties, about a year and a half after moving to San Francisco, I found myself walking down the hill from my Cole Valley apartment to the train stop a few blocks away, bundled up in a long coat and scarf. The fog was thick as smoke, obscuring my view of the Victorians across the street. It had been foggy for days. Weeks. Months? I had slowly become used to wearing the same jackets year-round, and comfortable in a familiar wardrobe of pants and sweaters. But that day, as the mist settled onto my cheeks, I suddenly stopped and thought, “Wait, what day is it? What month is it?”

I looked around me but the natural world gave me no useful information about this, no clues, and for a moment I felt completely disoriented and lost: a lone pinpoint on a map I couldn’t read; a wanderer stranded on the way. I grew up in Northern Ohio and went to college in North Carolina, both places that enjoy four distinct seasons, and something in me – some non-rational, intuitive, animal part – was missing the data I was used to receiving from the earth about the passing of time. There’d been no crimson leaves ushering in autumn; no change in humidity to indicate summer; no winter snows; no flowering spring. There was only fog. Grey, cool fog. The sound of the muni muffled in the mist. And then, just as suddenly, I thought, “Tuesday. It’s Tuesday. A Tuesday in February.” And went on my way.

I experience Palm and Passion Sunday a little like this. It is a singular feast marking two different events: Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem, on the one hand, and his arrest, trial, and execution – what we call, his “passion,” meaning suffering – on the other. So, what is it? Which is it? Looking around, it’s a little hard to tell. The palms we carry are reminders of Jesus’ triumphant entrance into Jerusalem, and they foreshadow the tree upon which he will be hung to die. We’ve got the red fabrics out, symbolic of the feisty, fiery Holy Spirit, surely at work in the crowd welcoming him to the city, but reminiscent of the blood yet to be spilled. Today is Palm Sunday and Good Friday, a full five days before Good Friday. If that isn’t disorienting, I don’t know what is.
If you grew up before the publication of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, you might remember a time when Palm Sunday was Palm Sunday and Good Friday was Good Friday. But following Vatican II, as part of the new Revised Common Lectionary, the three-year cycle of Biblical texts we read allowed in worship each Sunday, there was a recovery and renewed appreciation of the observance of Holy Week. The proper liturgies for Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday were drafted, and Palm and Passion Sunday was created, too. There’s some uncertainty about why these two observances were brought together. Some argue that reading the Passion at the beginning of Holy Week was an ancient custom rediscovered and revived with the Revised Common Lectionary. Others see it as an unfortunate compromise: Easter makes no sense without Good Friday, but most people who come to Church on Easter either can’t or won’t find their way here in the days that lead up to it, so at least they should have a chance to hear the Passion at some point, and the Sunday before is the best not-good option.

For a whole host of reasons, this is obviously dissatisfying. It’s true that jumping ahead to Easter without walking through Holy Week is ill advised - a bit like reading *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (the seventh in the series) or *The Return of the King* (the final in the *Lord of the Ring’s* trilogy) having never cracked the first several books. Or, worse, watching the movies (cheaters). You’ll find it enjoyable. You’ll definitely be entertained. But you’ll be missing out on so much of the good stuff! There’s so much nuance. So many back stories. So many details. And they will be there, right in front of you on Easter morning, but you won’t know to look for them. They won’t mean anything to you. And you’ll still leave feeling uplifted and encouraged, maybe even inspired and excited, but you won’t know what you are missing. You just … can’t. But the solution is not to randomly tear pages from the first and final books and bind them together, hoping they will communicate coherently the beauty of the whole. It just doesn’t work that way.

At least, this is how I’ve always thought about Palm and Passion Sunday. This is, in fact, a big part of why, today, we aren’t observing this feast as the Book of Common Prayer appoints. We were supposed to celebrate the Liturgy of the Palms outside, hear the Gospel detailing Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, and then come into the Church, where our service would continue, and we would hear the Passion in its entirety between the verses of the sequence hymn. Instead, we’re lingering in Palm Sunday, lingering on the road into the holy city, and will only turn to the Passion after communion. But … well, I don’t know about you, but this Lent has been, for me, a time for leaning into uncomfortable places, challenging my own assumptions, and trying to look
at familiar things with new eyes. And when I bring that critical yet curious gaze to Palm and Passion Sunday after almost forty days of prayerful practice, I’m seeing something I’ve never seen before.

*The House of Broken Angels* is the most recent novel by Luis Alberto Urrea, best-selling author of *The Devil’s Highway*. Though fiction, the core of the story is taken from his own complex and colorful life. Urrea was born into two worlds: the daughter of an American woman and a Mexican father, fluent in Spanish and English, living in San Diego and Tijuana, a native and a gringo. His was a childhood lived across not only national borders, clearly delineated by checkpoints and armed forces, but cultural ones less clearly marked in kitchens, living rooms, streets and schools. The book tells the story of Angel de la Cruz – known as Big Angel – who is dying of cancer. As his birthday approaches, his family decides to throw him a huge party, which he comes to realize will likely - no, surely - be his last. So being, as Urrea says, “a man of strong ego,” he realizes it would be pretty great to receive all the love and praise that get directed at folks as part of their funerals, and decides this birthday party will double as his wake.

Only just a week before the party, his mother, a hundred years old, dies suddenly, which throws the entire family into confusion. Finally, everyone agrees that the best thing to do is have her funeral the day before Big Angel’s birthday / wake, to make sure everyone in the extended family can attend both. It sounds like a terrible compromise: two for the price of one. Only we’re talking about life and death, matters too real and too raw to be reduced to some cheap gimmick. But then again life is unpredictable. Improbable. Chaotic. The basic details of this story came right out of Urrea’s family, and for them, as for the fictional family he describes, those two days became something so much more than anyone could have planned for.¹ A deep and hilarious and real and messy and oh so human meditation on mortality. A chance to say things that needed saying. A time to linger in grief and make room for joy, to reflect on what was, what is, and ponder the unknowable mysteries of what is yet to be.

I wonder if this isn’t part of the point of bringing Palm and Passion Sunday together: the joyful hope of Jesus’ finally stepping through the ancient walls, defying Rome’s authority, a prophetic moment if ever there was one, butting right up against the trauma and heartbreak of his terrible death. Hope and horror, praise and pathos, singing and sorrow, triumph and terror,

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meeting in the morning, mingling here. Inexplicable. Discomforting. But real. And if we are honest with ourselves, isn’t that closer to real life than we might want to admit? The courageous hope we muster day in and day out, believing in the goodness of people, all evidence to the contrary; consoling ourselves about the state of the world because the arc of history is long but it bends towards justice; reassuring one another that all shall be well when we aren’t at all sure it is so, wondering how we’ll survive if anything else goes sideways; constantly reclaiming stories, families, bodies, that have been wounded, fragmented, betrayed. Life is a jumble of juxtapositions, sad and strange, but so often beautiful, breathtaking, precisely where and when we least expect it.

It is Sunday. A Sunday in March. It is Palm Sunday. It is Passion Sunday. If you’re feeling a little disoriented, that’s probably normal. Maybe even a good thing. Life is disorienting, after all. But perhaps there is something in staying in the tension that will make us readier, more attentive to, more present for, the glorious surprise that awaits us on Easter. Perhaps tolerating complex truths makes us more able to embrace miraculous ones.

Journalist, poet, and author Ta-Nehisi Coates has emerged in recent years as a secular prophet of sorts, speaking searing yet relieving truths to the powers that be. His 2014 piece published by The Atlantic, “The Case for Reparations,” is a staggering read, exploring the history of slavery, Jim Crow, segregation, racist housing policies, and mass incarceration that have marred our national story since its very beginning. In a recent interview, he talks about the writing and reception of this piece, and how many people balk immediately, uncritically, at the very idea of reparations, saying, “My family wasn’t even here during slavery. We had no part in that. Why should we pay a price for it?” After thinking about this for a long time, he came to a simple response, and I quote:

“OK, but you cook out on the Fourth of July. Your ancestors weren’t here. They played no role in that. They had nothing to do with it. You take off for President’s Day, but you had no part in that. Your ancestors weren’t here. There are a number of patriotic rituals that folks have no problem participating in, as long as they can get credit for it.”

He calls this “à la carte patriotism” or a “sometimes-friendship: I’m there when I can get some, but when it gets tough, man, I’m out.” But the truth, he argues, is simple: you’re either in or

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2 The full article can be found here: [https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/)

you’re out. You’re a part of the story or you’re not. Fudging the details doesn’t make this any less true, it just makes the storyteller less honest.

I’m not here to make a case for reparations, but I think this point about how and when we opt into the stories of our families, communities, and faith is right on. There is such a thing as a la carte Christianity. We want the faith without the works; the mercy without the justice; the peace without the prayer; the resurrection without the dying. We want Easter without Good Friday. We want Palm Sunday without the Passion. But we are either a part of the story of God or we aren’t. We either own that or we don’t. Of course, in an ultimate sense we can’t avoid being a part of God’s story, but the choice to claim this, and proclaim it, is ours.

It is Sunday. A Sunday in March. It is Palm Sunday. It is Passion Sunday. We are part of the crowd crying, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” And we are part of the crowd crying, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” We lay palms at his feet. And when things get tough, men, we’re out. We welcome him with open arms. And we deny him in the next breath. But maybe, if we can stay present in both of these true stories, as much as we might prefer to deny or defend or discard some of the details, we’ll have a deeper appreciation of the glorious, breathtaking truth awaiting us on Easter. Well, there’s only one way to find out. Amen.