

“A good death”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Palm/Passion Sunday
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Matthew 26:36-44, 27:27-61

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

On Palm Sunday, one year ago, my wife Jenna went into early labor and began hemorrhaging. She almost died. Our twin sons, Ezra and Leo, were born late that night, too little and too weak to survive. They died. I never made it to church that Sunday. But I want to share with you the sermon I would have preached that morning. It's a sermon about a hospital room, about facing pain and death, and when I wrote it, I had no idea that I would spend that very day in a hospital room, facing pain and death. In the quiet of my grief, I returned to this sermon and found God speaking to me—in words I never knew were intended for me. I share them with you now.

In 2009, I worked for a summer as a chaplain at a trauma one hospital in New Jersey. When I began, I pictured myself sitting beside the dying, saying beautiful prayers and sharing spiritual wisdom. Where I expected to get this wisdom, I have no idea!

I remember one patient in particular. (And if you're having *deja vu*, that's because I shared this story in the church newsletter.) I found him in a hospital room on the oncology floor. It was late into the evening. A nurse had paged me because he was becoming more and more agitated, shouting, unable to calm down or sleep, convinced he was having a heart attack every few hours. He told me that, when his family visited, they only argued. He hadn't even held the hand of his wife for weeks. He felt alone, angry, and afraid. He wanted to know how he got here.

How did it come to this—lying in a hospital bed with doctors poking at him day and night, tubes attached all over his body, without any moment of real solitude and yet inexorably alone?

I wanted to give him some profound, comforting response. I wanted to say or do something that would miraculously restore the dignity, the power, the joy, the freedom that cancer had drained from his body. But the words lodged in my throat and would not come.

I felt a bit like those disciples must have felt on the eve of Jesus' arrest, in the garden where Jesus wailed, or how they must have felt scattered through Jerusalem, in locked rooms and alleyways—Jesus' distant, muffled cry from the cross in their ears. You just don't know what to do. The one thing you wish you could do—make the pain go away—you can't.

Ask most people to describe a “good death,” and they'll probably talk about dying in their sleep, peacefully, at an old age, surrounded by loved ones. And that does sound pretty good. But this was not my cancer patient's experience, and it will not be Jesus' experience. He is abandoned by his dearest friends precisely when he needs them most. He dies a slow, public, humiliating, undignified death. He dies a young man, probably not much older than I. And while he may face his death faithfully, he does not walk to that cross stoically. He falls to the ground, grieves,

weeps, and begs God to take this cup from him. On the cross, he cries out, demanding to know where his Father is.

The Son of God doesn't get a good death. And sadly, neither do many of us. Whether in life or in death, we know crosses of our own—crosses that, in the words of author Thomas Long, “pillage us of our dignity.” We know grief, and pain, and depression, and illness, and addiction, and loneliness, and suicide. All of which leads to this one overwhelming question: What is left of us after we are poked and prodded, cut and restrained, robbed of memory or control, swallowed by sadness? What is left of Christ?

We of course know the Easter story. We know all about the resurrection, all about the stone rolled away and the road to Emmaus and Pentecost and the birth of the church. But I want to know what's left of Christ before we ever get to Easter. I want to know what that man in the hospital bed has to hold onto.

There is an answer in our text this morning. You might miss it—it's so quick. It comes after this long litany of pure awfulness. After it all—after Jesus is stripped, crowned with thorns, beaten and crucified, mocked and asked why he can't save himself, after everything divine and dignified is stripped from him—a Roman centurion looks at Jesus and says, “Truly this was God's Son!”

After it all, Jesus is still God's Son. The earth still shakes at his death. His body is still wrapped lovingly in clean linen and laid to rest in a tomb. Women still sit in vigil.

All the things that should have proven that Jesus was not divine, was not loved by God, are still not enough to stop this Roman soldier from declaring Jesus' true identity.

Because there was something in Christ, and there's something in us, that the forces of death and grief cannot take from us, that shines the brighter for all the mud that life piles on: it is our sacredness as sons and daughters of God, a divine gift that says the chords of love and purpose, the veins and sinews of this body of Christ, cannot be severed.

Thomas Long writes, “Dignity is an achievement, a rank, and therefore can be lost. Sacredness is a divine gift, and it can never be taken away.”

The world thought for so long that the measure of sacredness was in power, control, dignity. What Jesus offers in that garden and on that cross is a whole other rubric. The measure of God is in love, and vulnerability, and unswerving solidarity.

After listening to my cancer patient explain his agony, his despair, his anger, you know what we did for the next hour? I held his hand. I held his hand while he slept and while I prayed silently beside his bed. I held the hand that had not been held for a long time. I held his hand, and suddenly, he became calm. Peace washed over him, just as Jesus promised, saying “I will not leave you orphaned.... Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you” (John 14:27).

I held his hand for more than an hour, in the twilight of the hospital, just sitting there, watching him sleep.

That's all he wanted; that's all anyone in that hospital wanted. That's all Jesus wanted in the end. Just for someone to be there and care. Just for someone to stay awake.

In that moment, I didn't just see a scared man whose body was dying; I saw a child of God, and he was beautiful. I loved him. God loved him. And, my friends, believe me when I say, cancer is a poor enemy against such love.

Christian Wiman, a young poet who converted to Christianity after his diagnosis of cancer, writes, "I am a Christian because of that moment on the cross when Jesus, drinking the very dregs of human bitterness, cries out, *My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?* (I know, I know: he was quoting the Psalms, and who quotes a poem when being tortured? The words aren't the point. The point is that he felt human destitution to its absolute degree; the point is that God is *with us*, not beyond us, in suffering.) I am a Christian because I understand that moment of Christ's passion to have meaning in my own life, and what it means is that the absolutely solitary and singular nature of extreme human pain is an illusion... Christ's suffering shatters the iron walls around individual human suffering... Christ's compassion makes extreme human compassion—to the point of death, even—possible. Human love *can* reach right into death, then, but not if it is *merely* human love."

He goes on, "Christ is a shard of glass in your gut. Christ is God crying *I am here*, and here not only in what exalts and completes and uplifts you, but here in what appalls, offends, and degrades you, here in what activates and exacerbates all that you would call not-God."

There was a third hand in that hospital room when I was an intern chaplain. And it was Christ's. He held our hands; he climbed into that hospital bed; he cried with us.

That's what this Holy Week is all about. It's about holding each other's hands and staying awake. It's about becoming apostles, living reminders, of the gift of sacredness. It's about sitting beside hospital beds, and saying, "Truly, this is a child of God."

Those were the final words of the sermon I would have preached on the day my sons died. Instead of preaching them, I was living them. I was cradling Jenna in a hospital bed, robbed of the power to save my boys, long ago stripped of the dignity that cared about screaming or sobbing in front of strangers. I felt like I had nothing left, and yet I looked down and found Jenna's hand in mine. A love undefeated by death. A love I needed more than ever. A love that washed over me as I held the tiny, wrapped bodies of my sons. A love that found me in the dark and told me God was with me, was with my boys. A love that cried, I AM HERE. And as I looked down at their sacred faces, I too said, "Truly, this is a child of God."

Amen.