

Suffering Messiah

Mark 11: 1-11; Philippians 2: 5-11
March 29, 2015, Palm/Passion Sunday
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I. Introduction

On November 16th in 1989, about two years before my first trip to El Salvador, members of an elite U.S. government-trained El Salvadoran army battalion broke into the University of Central America and murdered six Jesuit scholars there along with their housekeeper and her daughter. The Jesuits had been singled out by the death squads because of their advocacy for the poor and their criticism of the government. And they knew that they had been singled out for death and they stayed there because they had a fierce conviction that that's where Jesus needed them to be.

In their wanton destruction of the priests living premises, the soldiers also shot up their library, and falling into a pool of blood of Father Juan Moreno was ironically one of the 20th Century's great theological texts, a wonderful book by Jürgen Moltmann called *The Crucified God*. Moltmann's central thesis of that work is that the cross is the test of everything that deserves to be called Christian. The cross is the test of everything that deserves to be called Christian. It is the affirmation that God does God's most powerful work through the suffering of God's servants.

We are spending this Lent season exploring who is Jesus and looking at some of the titles and images that the scriptures used to talk about who Jesus is and help us understand what God was doing in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. And this morning, we're going to look at these two images of Jesus that are in many ways contradictory but when joined together become quite powerful, this image of Jesus as the Messiah and Jesus as the Suffering Servant.

II. The Crucified God

Throughout this series, we've talked about the fact that after Jesus' resurrection, as the church struggled to understand who Jesus was, they delved into the rich mine of Hebrew Scriptures and saw there a number of characters who they had understood to be independent but who came together in this person of Jesus. So, we've talked about the Son of Man and the Son of God, we've talked about Prophet, we've talked about Priest, we've talked about Redeemer, and this morning we see this joining together of these very disparate pictures of Messiah and Suffering Servant.

Messiah, of course, as a term is the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek word, *khristos*, Christ, and it simply means "anointed," the anointed one. It was used to refer to kings who were anointed at their coronation and sometimes used to refer to special instruments of God's plan. So, that in Jesus' day, when you use the term "messiah," the image that came to mind was that of a royal leader and, specifically in Jesus' day,

one who was going to lead the rebellion that would chase the Romans out of occupied Israel and re-establish the throne of David by military might.

The term "suffering servant" comes from a series of passages, four passages in the portion of Isaiah that we call Second Isaiah, which is a part of the book that was written during the Babylonian captivity when the Jewish community was trying to understand what it meant to live in exile. And the Prophet Isaiah sings these four beautiful songs about a servant who's unnamed but who is rejected by the people, who is degraded and humiliated, and somehow through that process is an instrument for God's redemptive power.

We know a lot of these passages of the servant songs from Handel's *Messiah* where you'll remember those beautiful pieces of music that say, "He was despised and rejected. A man of sorrow and acquainted with grief." Do you all remember those beautiful passages? All those Suffering Servant songs. And both *Messiah* and Suffering Servant were both a rich piece of Jewish tradition. What was unique to the early Christian community was that they understood these to be both applying to Jesus.

These two images of the triumphant Messiah and the Suffering Servant capture perfectly the tension that is Palm Sunday, this wonderful day in which we both celebrate Christ's triumph and entry into the city as the Messiah but then we watch that deteriorate over the course of the week. And as the rebellion doesn't happen, the crowds turn against him and despise and reject him and ultimately crucify him.

Today's Gospel lesson tells a story of a triumphant Messiah riding into Jerusalem and it's filled with images that all of the Jewish community would've understood to be Messianic. This person riding in on the donkey was a reference to Zechariah and how the Messiah was going to enter Jerusalem. The cloaks laid on the ground is a reference to II Kings when the people laid their cloaks on the ground as David entered Jerusalem. Hosannas from the beautiful Psalm 118, that Messianic Psalm. So, all of these were images and terms that the Jewish community would've understood to be indicating the Messiah and Jesus seems to have embraced all of that on this triumphant day.

But then our lesson from Philippians comes in and Paul tells us there that it was not through triumphant power that God's will is accomplished but through a process of self-sacrifice. Many scholars believed that this passage in Philippians predated Paul and was a hymn that was used and sung in the early churches and that Paul incorporated into this letter to the Philippians. And the hymn sings a song about a pre-existing Christ. It's a very highly exalted Christology that portrays Christ as the equivalent of God the Father and sitting in throne in glory in the heavens but then choosing not to exercise that power but to empty himself of it to become a human being and a human being that experiences rejection and suffering and even death as a way of releasing God's resurrection power into the world, so that God's will is

accomplished not through force, not through domination, but by giving up power and embracing the road of suffering. This is what Palm Passion Sunday is all about.

It was a struggle for the early church to understand this and it is a struggle I suspect for us to accept it as well because there is a piece of this that invites us to go to a place that none of us want to go. We live in a society that does everything it can to avoid suffering. We ignore those who live in poverty around us. We avoid any reminder desperately of our own aging processes and the mortality that is implicit in that. I know many of you have been following the devotional that we pulled together this season and many of probably read this week a wonderful passage from the poet and philosopher Mark Nepo who writes, "Breeders shoot horses with broken legs as if there's nothing else to be done. But now I know they do this for themselves, not wanting to care for a horse that cannot run. In just this way, fearful and selfish people cut the cord to those who are broken, not wanting to sit with a friend who can't find tomorrow, not wanting to be saddled with someone who will slow them down, not wanting to face what is broken in themselves." We all have a deep fear of the vulnerability that we are made aware of when we encounter suffering -- the suffering of ourselves, the suffering of the people around us -- and we try so hard not to engage that.

We have an interesting paradox that many of us, I suspect, experience every single day, when we encounter somebody that we know and we say, "How are you?" And we don't really want to know, right? I don't want to know. And I don't want you to know how I am. So, we say, "I'm fine. I'm fine," and we go our ways. Having disconnected ourselves from who we are and from who the other is because it's just too hard sometimes.

III. Embracing suffering

But the Gospels make clear that it is through the process of suffering that God works most powerfully. The gospels tell a story of a God who chooses to suffer, and this is important. It is not that as in, for example, Buddhist philosophy that talks about suffering as being inevitable. It's not that God takes inevitable suffering and redeems it. God chooses suffering and chooses to participate in suffering as an act of redemption. God chooses the way of suffering as a tool to bring about the wholeness of all of creation, so that if we then are followers of this God, our call likewise is to locate ourselves in the places where suffering happens.

It means that we place ourselves in soup kitchens where people are hungry and by hospital bedsides where people are sick and dying. It means that we place ourselves in neighborhoods that are torn apart by violence because that's where Jesus is. It also may mean that our own suffering takes on some different meanings. None of us want to suffer and many of us are in places of suffering, emotionally or physically, that are hard to deal with, and the invitation in our Palm Passion Sunday service is to acknowledge that even those places God uses for redemptive purposes, both in our lives and in the lives of the people around us.

I don't like being vulnerable any more than any of the rest of you and probably less than most of you but there have been occasions in my journey when I have been willing to be honest about my own struggle, and when someone has said, "How are you," and I haven't just said, "Fine." My friend, Drema McAllister-Wilson, actually works with me on this all the time. I'll ask her how she is sometimes and she'll say, "I'm good enough." Okay. That's honest. But I have been to places where I had been willing to say, "I'm not doing well and here is why." And what I have experienced is that opens a floodgate for somebody else to share their struggle. Because once we model a little bit of vulnerability, we give permission to people to likewise be a little bit vulnerable or we may give people an opportunity to extend us some comfort and strength. In either case, the Holy Spirit starts to be at work and starts to bring about a process of redemption that is healing for us and for the other and in fact for the whole world.

Palm Passion Sunday and the process of Holy Week and living through Holy Week is an invitation to us to make ourselves a little bit vulnerable, to acknowledge our own suffering, to engage the suffering of the other because we know that the promise of Easter is that God takes that raw and sometimes very raw material and uses it to transform the world.

IV. Conclusion

The death of those six Jesuit priests in El Salvador in 1989 shocked the world very profoundly and drew a very uncomfortable light onto the support that our government had been providing in perpetuating injustice and violence in that part of the world. And eventually that process led to peace talks and a period of reconciliation and stabilization for that country. That's not to say that God had planned for those Jesuits to die. They chose to stay in a place of suffering. They chose to make their lives acts of sacrifice knowing that the promise of the resurrection is that God would take that and bring about healing. Those were tragic acts of senseless brutality through which God told and continues to tell a story of grace and redemption, a story into which God continues to invite each of us.

Amen.