

Palm Sunday 2020

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Once upon a time, and yesterday—for this is how “recently” feels —
we were concerned with what we thought were ordinary things.

Now? Things are more elemental than ordinary:

“How are we to live and make a living when we are confined to quarters?”

It’s not a classical existential “why–am–I–here, what–am– I–to–do” moment;
we aren’t discerning the direction of our individual lives.

It *is* an existential moment *en masse*.

We are discerning how we will live together.

Shortly after the first of the “lockdown orders,” I was relieved to learn the Cadillac is standing with me

“in this difficult time” and will help me to take delivery on my new luxury vehicle
(in my personal sanctuary, of course) even if my liquidity is in flux at the moment.

I am much closer in finances and sentiment to the table servers no longer making \$2.13 an hour
than the solidarity assured me by Cadillac!

It takes a special kind of tone deafness to engage such marketing in *this* ‘once upon a time.’

The edge has been taken off such marketing now but I have no illusion that it is gone;

I suspect micromarketing to the wealthy has taken over instead.

We anawim who can neither escape the unfolding crisis nor enter *our* sanctuary are not worthy of,
and therefore not privy to, these special “opportunities.”

Knowing that if I am stricken by the pandemic’s disease I shall not even be worthy of a diagnostic test,
it seems only—fair?—that the trade of luxury transportation be hidden from me!

In my root tradition of Catholic Christianity, Palm Sunday is the beginning of Holy Week.

Holy Week is packed full of ritual pageantry.

Participants live—not relive—some of the most emotional and significant days of Jesus’ ministry.

When Easter begins on Holy Thursday evening, one is immersed in mystery and meaning.

The highs are the highest; the lows are the lowest.

The prayer is left ritually open until Saturday evening—

meaning neither Thursday’s nor Friday’s liturgies has a benediction—

to remind everyone Life is always of a piece

with the highs and lows, mysteries and meanings constantly folding into each other.

The story told in word and in action is not just the core of the Christian faith,

it is a recounting of humanity’s ongoing triumphs and travails.

The concerns are nothing less than life and death, family and oafs, friends and enemies,

oppression and freedom, injustice and service, torture and healing, love and fear,

today and tomorrow, endings and beginnings, questions and directions.

Coming to resurrection on Easter Sunday is not a happy-go-lucky process

with a grand whizbang—presto moment fixing the suffering.

It is arduous. It is painful. It is invigorating. It is overwhelming. It is elemental.

Orchestrating and performing the ritual celebrations is exhausting

but, to be honest, the *content* is always too much for the week no matter one’s role.

One year is never enough to fully understand the structure and connections of the ritual.

But more importantly, no one ever plumbs the depths of each element equally in any given year.

I take the time to describe this Tradition that has shaped me because it is apt.

The cast of characters in the Gospels recounting Holy Week are alive today:

The rich and the influential, whose lives are unthreatened by the social meltdown

that puts everyone else at risk, are there.

The cruel and the calloused, enjoying a moment of raw volatility at the expense of others, are there.

The vain and corrupt, who imagine that they enjoy power because life is fair,

and they have a God-given right to make choices for others, are there.

The faithful and earnest, looking out for those more vulnerable than they, are there.
The uncertain and the uncommitted, who are more voyeurs than volunteers, are there.
The clueless and the hedonists, without power but also without concern for others, are there.
Those fulfilling social roles with integrity and those hiding behind following orders are there.
Those who sometimes come through and at other times fail are there.
In short, we are there.

The emotions we experience in extreme conditions and stressful times are there.

The ethical choices are there.

And I am struck by two other parallels:

The heroes of the story are those who persevere whether or not they appear successful
to observers—yes, even Jesus, who dies a horrible death because he can no longer breathe.
This experience will offer us much for reflection and analysis for years to come;
we will not be able to “suck out all the marrow” as we go through it.
It is too soon to even guess what this existential moment means for we.

I certainly pray Covid-19 will not take your breath, but I know that all of us are touched by it—
whether through our own mild cases or through the social circumstances.

I am actually grateful that none of us has enough wealth to face the current struggle on our own terms.

It will cut down on the ways in which we are tone deaf to our community
and the private ways we might throw scorn at our neighbors.

However, I don't want to minimize the struggle we face: The circumstances are hard.

And as we know, it's going to get harder.

We don't need to be hard. We need to be honest.

While we cannot breathe together in meditation, or offer Tonglen for the world's pains, in our sanctuary,

I would remind you that our sanctuary is consecrated *by our presence*.

Thus, wherever you are truly present is holy ground.

As you light your chalice this morning and breathe through the joys and concerns,
you are contributing to the well-being of the whole.

As you wonder how to make rent and get the groceries you need but look for a way
to do that with kindness and justice, you are contributing to the well-being of the whole.

As you seek assistance to reduce your own anxiety or offer encouragement to neighbors who are low,
you are contributing to the well-being of the whole.

As you are doing all those things—

and more of the daily tasks of studying, cleaning, feeding, bathing, gardening, playing Yahtzee,
picking up groceries for a neighbor—

whatever it takes to be healthy—you contribute to the wellbeing of the whole.

Ordinary or elemental, doing all of those things with attention is being truly present.

As all the characters show up in the news and in your neighborhood, choose who you will be.

If you fail today, you can try again; please do.

As the range of emotions flows through you, remember not to hold them too tightly,

Acknowledge them but remember the Buddha's advice—they are illusory and impermanent.

And most especially, always breathe and recall, you are on holy ground

and you are essential to the well-being of the whole.