

SERMON- Palm and Passion Sunday
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Good Shepherd (Burke)
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Isaiah 50:4-9a Psalm 31:9-16 Philippians 2:5-11 Luke 22:14-23:56

OPENER:

About 15 years ago, the local newspaper in my hometown of Culpeper, Virginia, was interviewing folks after they had seen the movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. If you remember Mel Gibson's movie and all the controversy that surrounded it, this should not surprise you.

The reporters that night happened to interview none other than my mother.

They asked her: "What did you think of the movie?"

And she replied, not missing a beat, I kid you not, with:

"Well, it was pretty good..... but the *book* is better....."

ACCOUNT:

We have just heard the Passion Account from Luke and I am going to try to preach on it. But assuredly, *the book is better*. This account, and its dramatic retelling and staging, created shockwaves that still reverberate across the centuries

In this account, Jesus is always at the center of what's happening. He eats and shares a meal, he tells a couple of parables, he prays and tries to fall asleep. Jesus is arrested, and is questioned but does not speak. Then Jesus is crucified and he dies.

Notice how Jesus "does"—in some simplistic sense of the word—very little. Someone else tries to prevent him from being captured, someone else tries to conduct his legal defense, someone else carries his cross, someone else arranges his burial.

This all should make sense, because this is Jesus' "Passion", not his "Actions." The word Passion means "suffering" or "handing over." Think "compassion" or simply "passive."

IMAGES:

Jesus is still at the center of all the story, of course. He dominates the scene by his very being, like a powerful magnet drawing energy towards him.

Notice how all the side characters, Pilate and Herod and the two on the Cross, and Joseph of Arimathea and Simon of Cyrene, are all drawn to Jesus, by his gravitational pull.

They are all circling around this great light, like moths to a flame, in a frenzy not really knowing what they are doing. Even poor Peter, buzzing around clueless at this important hour.

Through it all, Jesus abides as the Light of the World that shines, but does not move, at least here.

Jesus himself simply shines. He refuses to resist arrest, refuses to participate in the trial, refuses to come down off the cross.

He is the Light of the World, as he suffers on that dark day.

PASSION:

We would prefer the story to end in a different way, for the star attorney to appear at the trial, for the military commandoes to rush in, for Jesus to be less passive. But all we get is Jesus and his Passion.

Most great stories have a hero at the center who acts, who moves boldly towards some goal. Jesus certainly acted throughout his life. But here, at the pivotal moment of his life, he provides a different model, a different type of action.

In the Passion Account, we learn that God acts not only through our actions, but through our passion, our suffering.

This is hard for us to grasp because we usually focus and judge ourselves based on what we do, what we did or did not accomplish at our work, in our families, and elsewhere.

Those are all important, and certainly we are called to act in our walks of faith.

But hearing this story of Christ's suffering, it causes us to reflect on all those things that happen *to us*, rather than what we do. That list might include unforeseen events of great joy and great sadness, falling in love, falling out of love, sickness, great moments of chance, of beauty and of cruelty.

We are so vulnerable to those, although we might not like to admit it, and Jesus was likewise, horrifically and painfully, vulnerable to them.

The Passion account show us the meaning behind it all, by making us ask the question: "Can we trust that God can use our Passion as much as our action, as God used Jesus' passion for the redemption of the world?"¹

EXAMPLES

Letting go is hard work, for me and my guess is for you, and it is difficult to acclimate to that loss of control.

As always, Jesus provides the example. Before his death, Jesus recites a portion of Psalm 31: "Into your hands, I commend my spirit."

This was, for Jews during Jesus' time, a nighttime prayer, a prayer of letting go. So it is for us, a prayer of letting one's hands off the controls.

GRAMMAR:

One way to think about this is through this thing called the "Divine Passive." The "Divine Passive" is the curious Grammatical construction which is used by the Gospel authors. It occurs when an action is done by an unmentioned force: God. They are so common in the Bible that we barely notice when it happens: "Thy will be done" in the Lord's Prayer, for example.

The divine passive is a way of reminding us that even when God seems hidden, God is still active.² They are an assurance that God is in control, regardless of the outcome (good or evil.)

The authors of the Gospels knew that our normal grammar cannot contain the reality of what happens with God. You have to break the rules, you have to upend the syntax and formula of the way we speak to try to describe it.

¹ H. Stephen Shoemaker, "Homiletical Perspective" *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 2, pg. 183.

² <https://interruptingthesilence.com/2013/04/02/the-grammar-of-resurrection/>

A week from now, you will notice that some of our most familiar hymns contain this divine passive: “He is Risen, He is Risen.” It should read “Jesus Rose, Jesus Rose. Or “Jesus Christ is risen today”—should read “Jesus rose today.” But that doesn’t quite have the same ring,

Again, normal grammar cannot describe the glory of the Easter morning and in order to demonstrate the redemptive power of what the Passion means, of how suffering works, all rules go out the window.

CONCLUSION:

When you start talking about the Grammar of the thing, you know it’s time to wrap it up. Apparently, Mel Gibson is going to make another *Passion of the Christ* movie: *Passion of the Christ 2*, set to be due out in 2024. Hopefully it will be a good movie. My guess is that the book will be better.

I invite you this week to experience the book through our Holy Week liturgies which dramatize the last days of Jesus’ life.

We need to be reminded ourselves, now at the end of Lenten Journey, that Jesus did not avoid the difficulty of the Passion, that we should not either. We need to take a step back from the busy-ness of our lives, to experience the story fully. Holy Week allows us to do that.

This story reminds us that God works miracles through the things that happen to us, through our passion, and most assuredly through God’s own suffering in the person of Jesus Christ.

AMEN.

