

“Dying to Be Changed”  
 Dorothy Whiston  
 New Song Episcopal Church

Palm/Passion Sunday Year A  
 Mt. 21:1-11, Ps. 118:1-2, 19-29  
 Is. 50:4-9a, Ps. 31:9-16, Phil. 2:5-11, Mt. 26:14-27:66

I sometimes end sermons with a poem to hopefully touch the other side of our brains and take the message a bit deeper. Today, I’m going to start with a poem.

### **Confession**

By Steve Garnaas-Holmes

God did not send Jesus to die.  
 But I confess that in a musty place in my heart  
 the lie that Jesus was meant to die suits me fine.  
 Oh, I abhor the theology: God does not need more gore.  
 But in my heart I confess  
 I'm comfortable with others suffering for my sake.  
 I rail against the idea that God needs a blood payment,  
 that God planned a tragedy—  
 a payoff instead of true forgiveness—  
 and I say with my lips the cross is a lynching,  
 a nazi gas chamber, another police shooting.  
 But secretly, I confess, I like my place of ease and safety.  
 I'm addicted to my privilege.  
 I let others suffer instead of me.  
 Even as I protest I participate.  
 I know God demands otherwise.  
 But I live as if God meant for me to survive  
 at the cost of others' lives.  
 I confess: I am saved from the virus of evil;  
 I also carry the virus.  
 I stand at the foot of the cross with tears in my eyes  
 and a hammer in my hand.  
 May I die, forgiven, and be raised, changed.

That may not be the world’s best poetry, but it gets right to the point of Holy Week. The Passion of Christ is not just about Jesus’ suffering and death 2,000 years ago. It is about our life vocation as Christians living in today’s world. It is about our commitment to actually following in Jesus’s steps of transformation through self-emptying.

Here’s another verse I think you’ll recognize:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
 who, though he was in the form of God,  
 did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,  
 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,  
 being born in human likeness.  
 And being found in human form, he humbled himself  
 and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.  
 [Phil. 2:5-11]

Paul even spells out what it means to have the mind of Christ in a day-to-day sort of way a couple verses earlier, when he says:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit,  
 but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.  
 Let each of you look not to your own interests,  
 but to the interests of others.  
 [Phil. 2:3-4]

This may not describe death on a cross per se, but it's pretty deadly to the ego. And it's certainly a counter-intuitive and counter-cultural way to live. It's the daily cross Jesus tells us we must take up if we want to truly follow him. Darn it anyway!

Because really, how often do we regard others as better than ourselves – at least without envy – or look out for others' interests over our own? If you're at all like me, it doesn't happen all that often, even with those you know and love. Let alone people generally. Let alone people whose politics repulse me. But God doesn't make such distinctions in her call to die to self.

The passion of Christ was – and is – about the call and courage of one human being to take on the social oppression of his day, with unconditional forgiveness, in hopes of transforming all of us, by God's grace. It's about Jesus's willingness, even encouragement of those who held worldly authority, whether religious or secular, to follow things to their logical conclusion so all could see clearly how the human world really works.

And that conclusion, in troubled times since the beginning of human civilization, has been to find someone to blame for what ails us all. Then to channel the collective hate and discord in their direction, and seek peace by doing them in, one way or another – be that police shootings or Nazi death camps or poverty. The death and resurrection of Jesus is an embodied invitation to follow a different path, costly as that might be.

Last week, Bill asked us whether we believe in the resurrection of Jesus. I would suggest that no matter what we **think** about the resurrection, as followers of Jesus we're called to enter deeply into the Easter story, which is really the bedrock of our faith. No matter how we understand it intellectually, Christians are meant to grow into trusting in and acting on God's

vital declaration that human discord, violence, and even death, do not have the final say; that divine creation is ever ongoing. And then to live – and risk – our lives accordingly.

In the earliest church the preparation period for becoming Christian, the catechumenate, was at least 3 years. It was a pretty rigorous endeavor of learning ways to pray, how to engage with Scripture, and practices for overcoming cultural and personal idols – which today we usually call addictions. It was a time to join together in caring for the sick and other marginalized peoples, while also advocating for justice.

Lent was originally the “home stretch” for preparing candidates for baptism -- a final penitential time of interior cleansing, a quiet time to let seeds of new life take root, as well as a time to finally delve into the creeds and rites of the church. Then during the Easter Vigil, candidates could draw on substantial lived experience as they made their baptismal vows to **continue** to live in the intentional, committed way that had prepared them to follow Christ.

Over the centuries, the formal catechumenate was eventually condensed to just the forty days of Lent, and eventually it pretty much disappeared. At the same time, people’s preparation for church membership became centered on repentance and learning doctrine and rites rather the extensive whole-person, experiential training provided in the early church. Much to the detriment of the Church, to say nothing of the Living Christ in the world.

Thankfully, over the last hundred years or so, the Church has been reclaiming many of its earliest teachings and traditions in hopes of revitalizing Christian life. These ancient practices are meant to foster active, intentional spiritual lives that help us become more willing and able to follow Jesus on the path of self-emptying.

Here are couple of recent, Episcopal examples: Since Presiding Bishop Curry’s book, “Love Is the Way” came out a couple of years ago, the national church has been encouraging people to adopt a spiritual Rule of Life to prepare us for the long-term, robust commitment followers of Jesus need to maintain. They reemphasized this in their Lenten materials this year, which some of us have been exploring. Our Diocese has also been providing opportunities to learn Centering Prayer, sometimes called Christian meditation. Centering prayer helps people cultivate a contemplative or non-dualistic mindset, an essential dimension of the mind of Christ.

About fifty years ago, the Catholic theologian Karl Rahner declared Christians of the future would be mystics or they would not exist. He wasn’t primarily interested in mystical experience. He was describing what makes a robust Christian, rather than one who simply affiliates with a religious sect; something he rightly predicted would wane in importance.

So, I wonder how this Holy Week before us might draw each and all of us into a renewed commitment to practice our Christian vocation more vigorously. To become more authentic Christians. I’m definitely preaching this sermon as much – really more – for me than for you all, given my over-busy, spiritually flabby Lent. But as I wrestle with my own call to spiritual

renewal, I wonder if there are others who might also be considering something new – or maybe very old – in your own Christian practice. If so, let's talk.

In the meanwhile, returning to our poem:

During this Holy Week, may we all die to ourselves and discover ourselves forgiven. May we rise on Easter, changed at our core – with the mind and heart of our self-emptying, life-giving brother Jesus.

Thanks be to God.