

The Muscle Memory of Holy Week

Palm Sunday 2022 – The Rev. Barb Ballenger

As you walk up the stairs to our second floor, you'll find an old wooden dresser in the landing. It has occupied space in every place that I have lived. At the moment it stores sheets and pillowcases.

When I tug open the drawers, which stick a bit, I am flooded with muscle memory of when it sat in the corner of the basement where my dad kept his wood working equipment and tools. I recall how that chest seemed enormous to me as a little girl. How some drawers could be easily pulled upon to reveal boxes of nails and screws and sandpaper, while others were heavy and hard to manage, weighed down with hammers and screwdrivers an electric drill and wood files.

When I run my fingers over its glossy, cherry-stained top, I am taken back to the year I hauled it up from the basement, cleaned it out and refinished it. I was 21 – a year of triumphal entries. I graduated from college with honors. I was dating the young man I would marry a year later. I landed my first job as a newspaper reporter in Rochester NY, and prepared to move far away from my childhood home in Akron, Ohio. It was also one of the worst years of my life. My father, dying from a malignant brain tumor, was steadily slipping out of my life, just as I was fully entering it. I was leaving a home that had been irrevocably changed.

I touch the wood and I'm back there, arms sore from stripping and scraping and sanding, stain under my fingernails, nose full of the scent of turpentine and polyurethane. I realize now that what I thought was an activity to distract myself from heartbreak, was actually a container for all the love and grief that was spilling out.

The triumph and the loss walked side by side that summer. They did not cancel each other out, as anyone who is grieving well knows. Instead they created more of a feeling of whiplash, as one overwhelming experience crashed into the next. Over time, the beauty and the ugliness of that year have woven themselves together into one tapestry, they were so tightly bound.

Palm Sunday – really all of Holy Week – employs this kind of muscle memory. We time travel into the dark places that we must return to in order to make some sense of where the light is coming from. In today’s liturgy, especially, we feel the whiplash of the human experience -- the joyous entry and the bloody exit, the proclamation of Jesus as King of Glory and the condemnation of him for it. It’s disorienting to go from one extreme to another in one liturgy, but there’s also something very honest about it. Life is like that..

With today’s Palm procession we also began a section of the story of God’s pursuit of us that has a particular arc. We start Holy Week with Jesus’ royal entry into Jerusalem, riding down from the Mt. of Olives. We conclude it in similar fashion next Sunday with his victorious reentry into the city, stepping out of the tomb. But to get there, we must walk deliberately through all that occurs in between.

So during Holy Week we bring out all the stuff that triggers an ancient muscle memory – the palms, the foot washing basins, the bread and wine, the greenery of the memorial garden, the candles going out one by one. Most agonizingly we bring out the cross. This week it is not gilded or painted, but stands large and plain and empty. Big enough to stand alongside. Near enough to touch.

We do this deliberate memory walk so that we can locate ourselves in the story once again, and consider where we stand these days with Jesus. We learn a lot about Jesus in the stories of Holy Week, his sense of himself as God’s son, the way he teaches, and shapes and comforts and forgives all the way to the end.

And we also learn about ourselves – because we are the people of Holy Week. Some of those people, Luke tells us, throw their cloaks down before Jesus, crying "Blessed is the king, who comes in the name of the Lord!" And some come early to the temple every morning to hear him preaching. Some accompany their religious leaders to demand that Pilate put Jesus to death, and others stand by saying nothing. Some go home from his crucifixion beating their breasts. And others who had followed Jesus from the start, witness all of it from a distance, watching for what will happen next.

The people of Holy Week must all contend with the cross, and its invitation to follow Jesus from the place where they were to the place where they will be as a result of his death and resurrection. And we must as well. This is our role in Holy

Week, our part. **We must ask ourselves what will we lay down at the cross this year, what will we let go of or be willing to die to, so that we can rise anew with Jesus?**

The muscle memory of Holy Week allows us to walk around in the stories with this question in our pockets. So I encourage you to pick up and take in the tangible stuff of these stories this week, and to go where they take you. Even if you are at home, livestreaming in, you can make the tangible items part of your experience and reflection.

However you go about it this week, do let yourself slip into story, where the beautiful and ugly do not cancel each other out, but remind us that the rough road to the cross leads again and again to a triumphal entry into the life of Christ on the other side.