

The stories and rituals of Palm Sunday give me whiplash, swinging as they do from the high of a crowd marching in one accord with their hero Jesus in triumphal procession, and the devastation of that hero's arrest, torture and state execution less than a week later. We manage to pack it into an hour of liturgy – the two emotional extremes of Holy Week.

It seems a strange practice, when the story will wind out more gradually in the liturgies of this week leading up to Easter. And yet there is something true and wise about placing the extremes next to each other in this way. It's very true to the human condition, the way that victory and defeat can stand side by side.

If you've been involved in the work of social change and transformation, you will especially know how this feels. How many times have I experienced the high of the protest march, or the gathering for street theater, or the sight of crowds massing to push for what is right – only to have the war happen anyway, the favored candidate defeated, the racist policies or laws upheld, the flow of guns maintained, the climate protecting policies weakened or reversed.

Palm Sunday, also called the Sunday of the Passion, fully captures the rift between how things should be and how they are – a dichotomy that marks our lives, our convictions, our religious faith itself. This is the lived experience of the disciples of Jesus, not just in Holy Week but in the journey leading up to it, and the one that follow it.

It's a reality that is also present in our texts from Matthew's gospel, which walk with us this entire liturgical year. The continuous condemnation of the temple officials that the author of Matthew employs reflects the painful rift between the Synagogue and Matthew's early Christian community in the decades after the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. While they were targeted to local religious leaders, Matthew's words have been used to condemn all Jews, and have fueled violent anti-Semitism to this day. Today's account of the passion is no exception.

So Palm Sunday is a tightrope walk of sorts – how do we not fall out of these stories and into an abyss of false hope or despair? How do we not give up when Jesus cries My God, My God why have you abandoned me? How do we hold on with him and to him today?

This day reminds me of the experience that Jewish author Eli Wiesel witnessed at Auschwitz, and which became the theme of his play "The Trial of God." Robert McAfee Brown, in the play's introduction, describes it this way:

"By the time he was 15, Eli Wiesel was in Auschwitz, a Nazi death camp. A teacher of Talmud befriended him by insisting that whenever they were together they would study Talmud – Talmud without pens or pencils, Talmud without paper, Talmud without books. It would be their act of religious defiance.

One night the teacher took Wiesel back to his own barracks, and here, with the young boy as the only witness, three great Jewish scholars – masters of Talmud, Halakhah, and Jewish jurisprudence – put God on trial in that eerie place, ‘a rabbinic court of law to indict the Almighty.’ The trial lasted several nights. Witnesses were heard, evidence was gathered, conclusions were drawn, all of which issued finally in a unanimous verdict: The Lord God Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth, was found guilty of crimes against creation and human kind. And then after what Wiesel described as an ‘infinity of silence,’ the Talmudic scholars looked at the sky and said ‘It’s time for evening prayers.’ And the members of the tribunal recited Maarive, the evening service. “<sup>1</sup>

Where are you God, where did you go?, we cry out with Jesus, and with Eli Weisel and with anyone who has ever witnessed the loss of good people or causes or beliefs. And at the same time we hold out hope that the divine one is within earshot, or we wouldn’t cry out at all.

But today is not just a day of contrasts. There is spiritual work to do in the painful place between what should be and what is. It is spiritual work that is fueled by the power of what will be on Easter, power that walks with us already because we tell these stories as people of the resurrection.

And the spiritual work for us is this –to ask ourselves where we find ourselves in the stories of Holy Week this year? What does our need for forgiveness look like this year? What must we die to at this point in our lives in order to follow Jesus more passionately this year?

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan suggest we ask ourselves: what procession are we in? In their book *The Last Week*, which examines Mark’s account of the final days of Jesus’ life, they point out that as Jesus was triumphantly entering Jerusalem from Bethphage, Pilate was entering Jerusalem on the other side of the city. He did this every year to ensure a show of Roman force during Israel’s politically turbulent high holy days. Jesus was accompanied by people who longed for freedom from the political and spiritual dominance that Rome and its collaborators in the Temple represented. Pilate was accompanied by soldiers who would play a role in Jesus’ violent arrest and torture and crucifixion.

Borg and Crossan ask, if you were there, which procession would you be in? And which one are you in today?

Similarly, scripture scholar Raymond Brown invites us to look at all the roles that emerge in the drama of Holy Week with an eye to which one we would likely play -- if we were really honest with ourselves. The cast of characters includes cheering crowds and jeering mobs; soldiers following orders; gentiles who recognize the son of God; political and religious leaders making cold calculations; opposing camps of faith-filled believers; disciples that deny, betray and run away; and courageous friends who keep vigil, tend a dead body, prepare burial spices.

Holy week at St. Peter’s invites us to fully enter the stories – we fold our palms into crosses; we bless bread and wine and eat it with soup and fruit; we wash one another’s feet; we strip the altar bare; we

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<sup>1</sup> (Introduction to the Trial of God by Eli Wiesel p vii)

walk around the neighborhood carrying a wooden cross and praying in public; we watch as light dims to darkness while we pray and remember and sing; we sit quietly in the garden of repose. We wait.

All to help us answer the question -- who are you in the cast of Holy Week?

If you recognize yourself as someone who needs God's compassion or understanding, forgiveness or redemption or some sign that God hears your cry for what should be-- attend to this week, and see it through to next Sunday. Then we will again experience the dizzying swing, although in the other direction, when a week of goodbyes is met with the sudden greeting of the risen Christ. Until then we walk the way of the cross.

Because we don't get to Easter without stopping at Good Friday. And we don't get to leave Palm Sunday without first adding our voices to Jesus' own passion.

Amen.