

I have a friend, a Benedictine sister, named Sr. Donald. Among the many pearls of wisdom that she has passed along is this: Sr. Donald likes to say that paradox is the footprint of the Divine. You can see what she means in the paradox of this very day—the Sunday that we call Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday—in the paradox of the Gospel reading for today, where the footprints of the Divine and of the human come together.

On this day, we are invited to walk the path that Jesus walked: hopeful people, facing harsh realities. We walk as hopefully as those people who walked with the new Messiah, spreading palm leaves on the path to Jerusalem shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” And we must nurture that hope. We must tend to that hope or we risk being overwhelmed by the world’s cruelties. We must tend to that hope or we risk withdrawing from the world’s anguish entirely. We must nurture hope. *Hope*, yes, but not sentimentality. *Hope*, not simply optimism that relies on other people doing something. *Hope*, not fantasy, because there are hard truths that must be recognized.

We *must* nurture hope because we also walk the path that Jesus walked and without hope, the path would be just too heart-breaking. There is an old John Prine song called “Angel From Montgomery” that has a line in the chorus that says: “Just give me one thing I can hold onto. To believe in this livin’ is just a hard way to go.” We have to hang on to the hope of Palm Sunday because the harsh realities of the Passion are just a hard way to go; the hardness of the Passion’s disheartening reality where Jesus, the acclaimed liberator, now mostly deserted by his followers, walks to the cross where he is crucified. We are left with the two women, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph at the tomb wondering what to do with the death of Jesus.

And so we begin Holy Week following the footprints of the Divine in the paradox of the hope of Palm Sunday and the harsh reality of Passion Sunday: both arising together in the same reading and in the same liturgy. We walked into St Elizabeth this

morning as a triumphant procession, singing “glory, laud and honor to our Redeemer King.” And we will walk out into a world of woes, the strewn palms in the aisle a reminder of what we thought might happen, but did not. Our challenge for today’s paradox and on through the rest of Holy Week is to avoid jumping right to next Sunday’s resurrection. Holy Week is our opportunity to reflect on what the suffering and death of a *triumphant* Jesus really means.

Our liturgy on this the first Sunday in Holy Week began as though we were walking with Jesus through the gates of Jerusalem, only to be caught up in events beyond our control. Over the course of this week, the events that we heard in the reading will bring us to the very edge of what we can bear. On Maundy Thursday, we will take an after-dinner walk with Jesus to the Mount of Olives and then to Gethsemane, where Judas will betray him. On Good Friday, we will gather at the foot of a cruel cross, much like the one where Jesus breathed his last words. The last words from the lips of Luke’s Jesus were: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” John’s Jesus said, “It is finished.” In the gospels attributed to Matthew and Mark, Jesus cries out from the cross “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” We can contemplate all four versions and reflect on what they mean.

In all four, God’s loving relationship with Jesus holds. In all four, God’s love is stronger than death, stronger than any evil that comes into opposition with it. In all four, what God asks of Jesus and of us is to stay true to God.

But Mark’s telling is the most desolate and perhaps the most human. For that reason, Mark’s version may also be the most misunderstood.

God did not wish death for Jesus. A friend of mine once said, “God’s *shalom* was murdered that day.” Jesus did not die at the hands of Jews. He was a threat to the violent, self-protective imperial Roman power structure. Jesus rode into the city defenselessly radiating God’s peace, inspiring the hopes of his fellow Jews and others that their dignity and liberty would at last be restored. In activating that hope, Jesus

drew the attention of fearful religious and political authorities who felt the need to preserve a system served their own interests at the expense of others.

Jesus did not die to satisfy an arbitrary and cruel God. God sent the Only Begotten to reveal God's nature. As the embodiment of God's nature to liberate, rather than to dominate, to enlighten rather than to inflict punishment, Jesus chose to be true to God's nature even if that meant he had to suffer the humiliation and the pain of the cross. His fidelity to God's deepest nature opened for us a new path to freedom and life.

And finally, Jesus—Matthew's Jesus, especially—did not die to teach us to simply bear whatever humiliations or abuses are inflicted upon us. Jesus died in solidarity with all those who suffer unjustly. Jesus lived his life standing up against the kind of suffering that does not *have* to be. Jesus *lived his life* resisting systemic evils that inflict suffering on others and calling out, not for death, but for change. Because Jesus died on the cross, God knows what it feels like to every person who feels such pain, such abandonment, that they cry out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Without nurturing hope for each other, we can all so easily slide into despair. *With* hope, we can be like the women waiting at the tomb, waiting and trusting. Hoping, in the face of set-backs. And so I want to leave you with is this invitation: As we begin Holy Week, the path that *will* lead us to Easter, let yourself follow the paradoxical footprints of the Divine. Walk with deep hope in the Risen Christ, but also walk the hard reality of Jesus' path from the city gate to the cross to the tomb. Come to this table in loving, willing humility, and leave as an ally and a light to an afflicted world. Walk in the footprints of the Divine: hopeful people, facing tough realities. And be prepared to be astonished as God's love transforms fear into joy, self-absorption into gratitude, and death into new life. Let Christ's walk be our walk.