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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 2A15
Palm Sunday (Year A) 11:00 a.m. Online Eucharist
Sunday 5 April 2020 With Passion Narrative Matthew 27:11-54

Isaiah 50:4-9a
Psalm 31:9-16
Philippians 2:5-11
Matthew 21:1-11

The Plague on Palm Sunday

"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus... who emptied himself..." (Phil. 2).

1. Death grips us. In these COVID19 days something within us is passing away. The former world with its sureties and distractions suddenly has dissolved and we are left to face ultimate reality. I read Albert Camus' book *The Plague* because I wanted to see more deeply into what is happening, to understand how we might be saved.

Camus published *The Plague* in 1947. He started writing it while he lived in an apartment with in-laws whom he despised in the Algerian town of Orans. Suffering from tuberculosis he wandered the streets with terrible, disorienting attacks of fever. He ended up leaving the city and crossing the Mediterranean Sea to recover in the French Alps. But during this time the Allied armies retook North Africa and the borders were closed. Camus missed the last boat and found himself stranded, separated from his beloved wife Francine and, trying to find a way to be useful to the resistance in Nazi-occupied Paris.¹

So the plague is a way for Camus to write about a painful war and separation from loved ones. He points out that we are surprised by plagues and wars despite how often they recur in history.² We simply don't want to believe what is happening to us and so government officials refuse to face the magnitude of the problem and offer lying reassurances that ultimately make everything far worse.

Camus writes about quarantine as the military seals off the city and train service stops. He writes about auxiliary hospitals in former schools and the medical system being overrun, about patients being separated from their families by police and then dying alone. Funerals happen with maximum speed and minimum risk. At first the dead are treated like individuals but before long the bodies are merely slid into quicklime pits and then finally a street car line is dedicated to transporting bodies to a crematorium.

Most of all Camus writes about the inner lives of people experiencing appalling events. He writes "great misfortunes are monotonous" (169) and explains how we become desensitized, chronically cynical and isolated from each other (165). The plague killed the ability to love or even to have friendships (171). The most hopeful element of the

novel concerns a community of volunteers who take risks and try to alleviate suffering even when everything seems hopeless.

Still there are moments of beauty in the terror. Two friends experience transcendence swimming in the harbor at night and are possessed by, "a strange happiness... that forgot nothing not even murder" (239). At the end of the plague the survivors see the smoke from the first train to visit the city. It comes into the station platform and the feeling of exile vanishes, "before an uprush of overpowering, bewildering joy" (274). One man's wife has jumped into his arms before he can really see that it is her. "He let his tears flow freely, unknowing if they rose from present joy or from sorrow too long repressed... For the moment he wished to behave like the others... who believed, or made believe, that plague can come and go without changing anything in men's hearts" (274).

The point that Camus makes over and over is that nothing can really take away the pain that everyone suffered or undo its damage. They may be able to experience joy, but it is always mixed up in that misery. And this makes it like the Palm Sunday story.

2. On this day Palm and Passion Sunday we both celebrate the fanfare of Jesus' triumphant arrival in Jerusalem and observe the horror of his betrayal, isolation, humiliation, trial, torture and death. What Jesus suffers changes *our* story of what it means to be human, what we are created to strive for. God calls to us especially during this time when so many meanings are changing.

Matthew refers to prophecies in the Books of Zechariah and Isaiah about the arrival of a conquering king whose "dominion shall be from sea to sea" (Zech. 9).³ Crowds cut palm branches, and lay cloaks on the ground. They shout, "Hosanna in the highest." Matthew puts before us a symbol that we still recognize today – the arrival of victorious armies. Think of Roman Emperors, the Arc de Triomphe, Hitler's arrival in Paris, or the lines of tanks and missile launchers parading through the streets of communist Moscow or today in Pyongyang.

"The whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?"" (Mt. 21). And Matthew answers this question by completely changing the meaning of victory, kingship, and what we should do with our lives. Jesus teaches that the goal of our existence is not to be safe, or feared, or to have power over others, but to serve them.

Paul writes about how he came to experience Jesus alive in himself, how his whole system of values was overturned. In a letter to friends in the church of Philippi he writes, "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 a slave... he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even on a cross” (Phil. 2). This may be one of the most important verses in all scripture but it is more abstract and theoretical than Matthew’s story of how Jesus is betrayed and tortured.

3. So much in the world has a different meaning to us now. Grocery stores and restaurants used to seem like safe places, people crossing the street to avoid being on the same sidewalk used to be rude, visiting senior citizens used to be compassionate. Now staying home and covering our faces is responsible. An aircraft carrier in the most advanced navy in history used to be a symbol of military dominance but has instead become an emblem of danger, confinement and terror. The captain ready to do anything for the sake of his crew and powerful governors, who publicly beg for medical equipment, have become heroes.

The body means something different to us now. Our own bodies feel more vulnerable and isolated. They consume vastly more of our attention. In this city we see bodies lined up outside stores around the block in the rain to shop for food or be tested for COVID19. We feel the absence of others’ bodies acutely. In the news we see bodies stacked up in Italian churches, refrigerator trucks and makeshift morgues. Every two and a half minutes another person in New York dies as fear grabs the city by the throat.

And with all of this our stories are changing, stories about poor people, what the economy is for, our political identities and what really matters. These stories have life and death consequences. For instance the story that COVID19 was just another way that liberals were trying to discredit the president, the myth that the disease was only a problem for faraway people, even the idea that reality is a made up of competing peoples rather than a single interdependent, interconnected human family – these stories are causing terrible suffering. There is an awful, demonic kind of pride in the destructive story that religious people are entitled to gather large groups of people because what they do is so important.

4. We only partially choose the stories that give us meaning. In many ways eventually reality forces itself on us. When we open ourselves in prayer, God comes and changes the story of our life. This happened to the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881).

In 1849 he and other revolutionaries were dressed in their funeral clothes and marched out to be shot. The firing squad took their positions, the drums beat and at the last second a messenger arrived on horseback with the news that the Czar had pardoned

them. This moment changed everything forever. Suddenly Dostoyevsky could see the truth. Within days he wrote a letter telling his brother how much he loved him. He felt determined to no longer get mired in little insecurities and pettiness.

Dostoyevsky writes, "Never has there seethed in me such an abundant and healthy kind of spiritual life as now... I shall be born again in a new form... Life is a gift. Life is happiness, every minute can be an eternity of happiness..."⁴ And this changed him. It was the beginning of a radically different life in which he tried to empty himself as Christ did.

In another context the contemporary poet Christian Wiman writes, "Religion is not made of these moments, religion is the means of making these moments part of your life rather than merely radical intrusions so foreign and perhaps even so fearsome that you can't acknowledge their existence afterward. Religion is what you do with these moments of over-mastery in your life."⁵

In these days when the structures for meaning are most fluid Jesus shows us what it means to live in the knowledge of God's love for us. This humility, this submission to God, looks different for every person. For me it is a sense of connection to a transcendence and beauty that seems almost always to be available when I am able through prayer to move beyond the dramas of my ego.

This week a friend sent me a poem by Wendell Berry about this experience that continues to recur in my life. It is called "The Peace of Wild Things."

"When despair for the world grows in me / and I wake in the night at the least sound / in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be, / I go and lie down where the wood drake / rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds, / I come into the peace of wild things / who do not tax their lives with forethought / of grief. I come into the presence of still water. / And I feel above me the day-blind stars / waiting with their light. For a time / I rest in the grace of the world, and am free."⁶

Death grips us, but we are still free. Christian Wiman writes, "There is no way to return to the faith of your childhood... for faith in God, is in the deepest sense faith in life."⁷ Something within us is passing away, but God still abides. The plague has arrived but you are God's child, and life is still a gift. May the triumph, the blessing, the self-emptying and the resurrection of Christ be yours today in the grace of this world and always.

¹ I benefited from listening to Alice Kaplan's Yale University course "The Modern French Novel," on 2 April 2020 with Camus translator Laura Marris as a guest.

² "Everyone knows that pestilences have a way of recurring in the world; yet somehow we find it hard to believe in ones that crash down on our heads from a blue sky. There have been as many plagues as wars in history; yet always plagues and wars take people equally by surprise... When a war breaks out, people say, "It's stupid; it can't last long." But through a war may well be "too stupid," that doesn't prevent its lasting. Stupidity has a knack of getting its way; as we should see if we were not always so much wrapped up in ourselves." Albert Camus, *The Plague*, tr. Stuart Gilbert (NY: Vintage Books, 1972) 35-6.

³ "Lo your king comes... triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey... his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth" (Zech. 9).

⁴ David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life* (NY: Random House, 2019) 50-51.

⁵ Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditations of a Modern Believer* (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013) 70.

⁶ Wendell Berry, *Collected Poems 1957-1982* (San Francisco: Northpoint Press, 1984) 69.

⁷ Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditations of a Modern Believer* (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013) 7.