

Sunday of the Passion / Palm Sunday
Sunday, April 17, 2011

Isaiah 50:4–9a
Psalm 31:9–16
Philippians 2:5–11
Matthew 26:14—27:66
Year A

In the name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

St. Augustine called this the **Great Week**.

And it will be, particularly if we do our jobs. Me in my preaching and presiding, Lars in his accompaniment of song, the readers in reading, the altar guild in preparing the environment, the assisting ministers in their praying, the ushers in their hospitality, and all of us, in---**noticing**.

At Committee meetings, at staff meetings, during Bible Study, I have been asking groups from Bethesda one question: “What are you noticing?”

People say better worship attendance, they say they are excited at greater participation by youth, they say new hymns, they say lively conversation. Those at the Inquirers’ Sessions say they have felt particularly welcome, they love the use of music in our worship, they appreciate our attention to connecting with local agencies and ministries of social justice.

What are you noticing?

In my study of liturgical history, I’ve noticed that the liturgical role of the deacon, the one whose part Kari is playing today is particularly compelling.

In worship, the deacon, what we call the Assisting Minister, has a special role to pray. They do a wonderful job in engaging us to pray, don’t they? The deacons, like Kari today, also prepare the meal of our communion, setting the table, as it were. In some traditions it is the deacon’s privilege to read the Gospel. But one of my favorite roles for a deacon, particularly thinking of this Great and Holy Week, is to prompt us to **notice**.

The deacon barks out orders to the worshipping assembly: **kneel now! Bow your heads. Hear the Gospel! Let us pray. And go home, go in peace.**

The deacon says in so many words, “pay attention.” Notice what’s going on. As if it will make a difference.

And it will.

When Callista Isabelle found out I was coming to be pastor here at Bethesda, she sent me an email to say how excited she was. Callista is the Associate University Chaplain at Yale, and a member of Bethesda. And like a deacon, she told me to pay attention by saying, “blessings in this **liminal** time.”

You see, I was entering into a time of transition. I was opening myself to the work of the Spirit, moving me from sharing the life of Christ with one congregation and coming here.

Liminal time is a holy time. In Celtic spirituality, they call it “the thin place,” as if the walls between the divine and the human are sheer, as if God just might break through to our sphere, and we just might notice.

Holy week is not like a trip to a museum where we tour the sights of ancient history, admiring its beauty.

It’s more like crossing a threshold, making a move, going on a pilgrimage, noticing time and place and people and story like never before.

Here Jesus goes resolutely toward his death while around him his followers fall apart. Here Jesus becomes completely and utterly betrayed, denied, tried, and executed. And while we watch, and while we notice, we see that by emptying himself, in going to the darkest place imaginable, we are changed, and the world as we know it is changed.

God’s reach knows no bounds. In the cross we find life. The infinite enters the finite. And on Easter, the grip of death and fear explodes.

But my saying it is only part of it. Your experience of it is the thing.

I invite you to enter into this Great Week, this Holy Week, this liminal time, this thin place, with your whole selves.

In 2008, I was in Jerusalem, at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the place that commemorates Christ’s death and resurrection. It wasn’t my first time there, and frankly, the crowds kind of turned me off. I had been there enough and studied it enough to know that really and truly it is a kooky place. The Greek Orthodox have their place over here; the Coptics have their place on the roof; the Catholics have their place over here. There is a lot of gaudiness, kitsch, and clutter. There is a lot of piety exhibited that I just cannot get into. There in 2008, I said to myself in my most theological inner voice, “I don’t need to be here to know that Christ gave everything for me.” While my inner voice was speaking, I noticed how moved so many of the pilgrims were. So I spoke back to my inner voice, saying, “I don’t care. I’m just going to do it.” I lined up and began moving toward the place where Jesus supposedly died. And I was so incredibly moved, not because I was there, but because I put my whole self in.

That’s what I invite you to do, just like the hokey pokey ends up. First you put your hand in, then your foot, then your head, then your whole self.

We are heading into the Great Three Days later this week, where we still expect God to show up. We expect Christ to continue to break through, as we tell the story, as we enact the rituals, and as we, if everyone does their jobs, **notice** new life out of death in our world, in our lives, and yes, here at Bethesda.

Have a Great Week!

In the name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen