

PASSION (PALM) SUNDAY | APRIL 2, 2023

ISAIAH 50:9-14A | PSALM 31:9-16 | PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11 | JOHN 11:1-45

There's a funny phrase that people often use in apologies that are not actual apologies. *I wasn't being myself.* It's a line that's easy to poke fun at. For one, it's the sort of thing people only say when they're apologizing. When someone compliments us for something, we never reply, *Yea, isn't it strange? I wasn't really being myself.* But more important, it seems to suggest that there is some version of ourselves that exists apart from our actions. *I may have poured sand in your gas tank, but the real me was off helping people cross the street.*

It's easy to laugh at that phrase, but it hits on something important. We often do feel as if there are multiple versions of our selves. Maybe we have a "family" self and a "work" self and a "school" self. We might have an "around friends" self and an "around Pastor Joseph" self. Maybe we have a sense of internal self and a self that we express out in the world. When people say, "I wasn't being myself" they're not wrong. They're just leaving part of it out. I wasn't being the self I wanted to be in this situation.

We like to think that we have some true essence that we cast out into the world, that there is some version of us that guides all of our actions. But the truth is our actions are often contingent. They depend on who we're with or where we are or what else has happened in our day. We might be a model of patience until we get that seventeenth robo-call. Or we may be on our last nerve until we hear that old song we love. People at work may describe us one way while our friends would say the exact opposite. Who are we? Well, it depends.

This is part of what Palm/Passion Sunday is about. In both of today's gospel readings, we hear stories about crowds. First, we hear a story about Jesus's entrance into Jerusalem, where he is acclaimed by crowds of people. Second, we hear the story of Jesus's passion, where crowds call for him to be crucified. These two crowds have vastly different responses to Jesus. And so we may be tempted to think that they were two different groups of people. The admirers of Jesus first. The enemies of Jesus second.

This interpretation doesn't just happen to be factually wrong. But it is also comically self-serving. It's mostly just a way to shrug off responsibility. Because as soon as we separate the palm crowd from the passion crowd, we start locating ourselves in the former.¹ It's easy for us to project ourselves back into history and say, *If I had been alive at the time, I would have done this. I would have welcomed Jesus. I wouldn't have called for him to be crucified.* When we read ourselves back into the story, it's tempting to put ourselves in the most favorable light.²

But the irony of the story—also what's disturbing about it—is that the crowds are made up of the same people. The people who welcome Jesus into Jerusalem are the same people that cast him out of the city. So do we welcome Jesus or call for him to be crucified? Well, it depends. If we're around our friends and feeling hopeful about the future, perhaps the former. If we're feeling anonymous in the crowd and nihilistic about Jesus's mission, probably the latter. But most likely, we would do both. These gospel readings are not stories

¹ This is, in part, how people end up with anti-Semitic readings of the passion narratives.

² This is a tangent beyond what we're doing here, but people also do this all the time with guessing how they would have acted during events the civil rights movement.

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of good people and bad people. They're stories of people who can act in diametrically opposed ways depending on the context. People who, like St. Peter, might look back at their actions and think, "I wasn't really being myself." Or, at least, not the self that I wanted to be.

But compare that to how Jesus acts in today's gospel readings. While he's on the cross, Jesus is mocked by onlookers. "He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, 'I am God's Son.'" "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." If this sounds vaguely familiar to you, it's because it's very similar to a scene at the very beginning of Matthew's gospel when Jesus was tempted in the wilderness. We heard that story the first Sunday in Lent. In that story, Jesus rejects temptation three times and then begins his public ministry.

And here on the cross, Jesus is tempted again. And surely, the temptation must have been even greater in this moment than in the wilderness when Jesus had nothing to lose. But what does Jesus do? He resists it just the same. Jesus's public ministry begins and ends with him resisting temptation. When he has nothing to lose and when he has everything to lose, in life and in death, in success and in seeming failure, Jesus is the same.

As Holy Week has been approaching, I've been reminded of a conversation we had with a family this past fall at Wyckoff Day. We were chatting with a family that was—very admirably—trying to teach their kids about various religious traditions and practices. And the kids had a very good question about Christian practices. They were wondering why, if Jesus was killed on a cross, do we have them in our sanctuaries? Why would we insist on having something sad in our churches?³

And this is why. Because in the cross, we see that the divine life and the divine love are inexhaustible. When we say that God's life is unending or God's love is unchanging, we don't just mean that God is always the same regardless of how much time goes by. But we mean that God's character is the same regardless of what we do. That no matter how hard we push God away, how often we resort to violence and oppression, how self-righteous and selfish we get, God is the same. Always loving. Always forgiving. Always inviting us into relationship.

People change. We're loving up to a point. We're forgiving up to a point. We're generous up to a point. But beyond that point, look, everybody has their limits.

But even when we're at our worst, God is still God. Even when we're not being our selves—or the selves we'd like to be—God is the same. There's never a moment, not even amid suffering and death, when God stops being God for us.

That's why we don't just put a cross in our sanctuary but mark ourselves with a cross whenever we gather for worship. It's why we mark a cross on the foreheads of the newly baptized and why we make a sign of the cross over the remains of the dead. Because no matter which self we are, no matter what joys or sorrows fill our life, the gift of divine life is always there. Even in failure, even in weakness, even in death, the wondrous gift is given.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

³ Ironically, there was a good Tim Alberta piece in *The Atlantic* about white nationalist "churches" which included the observation that they *don't* have crosses in them, probably because they're seen as signs of weakness.

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