

Seeking life in death

LIVING OUT THE CHALLENGE OF EASTER IN A COVID-19 WORLD

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Holy Week has always felt like a roller coaster ride for me, a mix of extremes. But God is present – from Palm Sunday’s loud hosannas, through Gethsemane’s anguished prayer, to a gory cross and the dead silence of Saturday, all the way to a jaw-dropping Sunday. We know the story well, but in this COVID-19 world, I bet we understood it with new dimensions this year.

This Palm Sunday, with my own palm branches at half-mast, I cried a louder Hosanna than I had ever done. I truly had a reason to say: “Save us in the Highest!” – and pictured not just the crowds of joyful people, but also the many whose lungs didn’t allow a whispered Hosanna.

Even though Jesus knew what was about to happen – and perhaps because of the coming pain – he let the crowd have a big party. He understood the importance of gorging on joy, so that you are shored up for the ugly dark moments. Friends, there is probably

more pain ahead, so take a cue from the Man of Sorrows, and don’t stint on the beautiful and joyful moments. Find ways to ring those joy bells for yourself and your communities.

Then in dark Gethsemane, Jesus gave us an example of how to face our deepest fears: kneel aground, cry for change in circumstances to the changeless one, and trust his will. Don’t look at the dark-

ness; turn to the light. Fear is a lie peddler. The cure is in tears and words; heart-wrenching tears and loud protestations, not mute resignation that leads to cynicism. When our eyes are washed with tears, we can see more clearly what is true.

The Friday that we call “Good” and the Saturday we call “Holy” take the prize for confusion, despair, and the seeming absence of God. If we are honest, even we who have received great benefit from the sacrifice on the cross do not really understand it. Thankfully,

we don’t have to completely comprehend it to invite people to the hope it signals.

This Good Friday, in light of COVID-19, I paid more attention to the silences and pathos in the story and in our world. Our airwaves were filled with news of people dying in hospitals who were, because of the disease, denied the embrace of loved ones. We know that Mary was unable to hold her child as he died. In the same way, taking a page from Israel’s prophets who spoke of Yahweh in deeply anthropomorphic terms, I wondered how many angels and archangels had to help prevent the Father from reaching out to hold his Son. God’s pain and seeming helplessness on that day mingle with the pain of all who are lamenting empty arms this season.

When Easter morning dawned this year, all over the world it was not “business as usual”; instead, empty churches mimicked the empty tomb. There were no gaily decorated altars and nicely dressed worshippers. But perhaps this was the most “real” Easter of our time. Just like at that first Easter, there were no full church buildings, and only small handfuls of believers gathered. The Church now gets a fresh start.

This Easter, with raw pain and confusion over this devastating pandemic, we were specially invited to peer into that place that once entombed death – and to envision a womb that will bring life. We speak resurrection joy and hope into a world filled with confusion, doubt, and pain.

Now we live out the challenge of Easter, following God through the valley of the shadow of death. Even from behind the closed doors of our partial lockdown, we can do acts of goodness that spell hope. And so let’s bring on the celebrations, cry out in supplication to God, and wait for the glory to come.



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