

Sermon Preached on April 10, 2022 – Palm Sunday

By The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson

St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church, Yarmouth, ME 04096

Luke 19:28-40

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Psalm 31:9-16

Philippians 2: 5-11

Cruciform Life

In a recent article in the local paper "The Forecaster," Somali-American writer, radio journalist, and public speaker, Abdi Nor Iftin, wrote about his experiences of Ramadan growing up as a child.

"Preparation for it would start weeks prior. Quranic schools were closed for the holy month. To welcome Ramadan, we washed clothes, cleaned the house and volunteered at the mosques. On the evenings during Ramadan, we stayed up all night telling stories of the prophet Mohammed and his migrations around the Middle East. The local radio stations had nightly quizzes about the history of Islam. And Quran reading competitions continued every night, when the winner with the best recitation would be awarded with a dozen copies of the Quran."¹

This stands in stark contrast to how Abdi experiences Ramadan, the holiest month for our Muslim siblings, here in Maine.

Ramadan started on April 2nd and, Abdi notes, "it is business as usual in Maine."

I was struck by Abdi's article, which I read standing in line at Clayton's the other day waiting for my sandwich, because I thought how disheartening it was that Abdi does not feel like there is capacity for him here in Maine to experience Ramadan in the ways he feels called to (this was the substance of his article).

I was also struck because I remember it wasn't until seminary that I considered the fact that Christians have a holiest week in the way that our Muslim siblings have a holiest month, Ramadan, and our Jewish siblings have the high holy days of Rosh Hoshana and Yom Kippur, and that I had never really done anything to mark it.

The holiest week of the Christian Calendar starts today – it is the week which starts with Palm Sunday and ends on Easter Sunday.

If I were to describe the traditions of my family in how we observed Holy Week as a child, it would look nothing like what Abdi described from his childhood and not because we grew up in different faith traditions – it's because my family and I didn't mark Holy Week any differently than any other week in the year.

If anything, Holy Week was often the week before April vacation, so it was likely marked by exams and large projects being due – in other words: stress!

¹ Nor Iftin, Abdi "Through My Lens: Recognizing Ramadan Important to Maine Muslims." Forecaster: Portland Press Herald. March 29, 2022 <<https://www.pressherald.com/2022/03/29/through-my-lens-recognizing-ramadan-important-to-maine-muslims/>>

Yes, we waved the palms on Palm Sunday, and I do recall attending Maundy Thursday services and being totally intrigued by the idea of having my feet washed.

Easter Sunday was about my Easter Bonnet, the Easter Egg hunt, and my congregation sang the “Hallelujah Chorus” every year.

The holiest of weeks!...not much different than any other.

In seminary I started to think about this differently – seminary will do that to you.

I started to wonder: how would I shape my week if I were to acknowledge each day as being part of the holiest of weeks in the Christian faith – what might I do to remind myself? How might I perceive the world around me knowing I was in the holiest of weeks?

What if I gave Holy Week the same honor and respect I tend to offer my Muslim and Jewish siblings when they are in the midst of their holiest of days?

I’ll tell you, it’s hard – the world doesn’t stop, life is super distracting, and being intentional like that takes a big effort.

If I’m honest, I haven’t landed on any specific traditions for Holy Week like what Abdi mentions in his article – outside of attendance at Holy Week services, in which I find great meaning.

But, the meaning of Holy Week has changed for me since making this effort even to think about it.

Once I started to pay attention to Holy Week, I began to notice as Debie Thomas writes in her reflection for this week, that “In many ways, Holy Week holds within it our entire human story — all of the hope, tragedy, love, and joy that shapes our days. It reveals to us the horrors of injustice, but it also shows us the deepest love the world has ever seen. As we move from the intimacy of the Last Supper, to the agony of Gethsemane, to the desolation of Golgotha, we can find traces of our own stories — stories of friendship and betrayal, fervor and futility, hope and humiliation.”²

Holy Week is a time to grapple with, address, celebrate and grieve the realities of life like Jesus did - it is a time to learn and to remember, to reflect and to repent, to experience life and death and then life again like Jesus did.

Holy Week is a reminder that we, like Jesus, live the way of the cross every day of our lives.

And Holy Week is an invitation to live the way of the cross every day of our lives.

That’s not to say we live the way of death – though, that’s what the Roman authorities wanted for Jesus – for him and his message, his ministry, his meaning to die – but rather living the way of the cross is a way of *living*, living at the intersection of all that is human and real with all that is holy and divine – A cruciform faith, a cruciform life.

² Thomas, Debie. “Cruciform.” *Journey with Jesus*. 3 April 2022. <<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=3362>>

Debie Thomas continues in her reflection that “in a cruciform faith, we can no longer divide ‘human’ things (loss, grief, pain and humiliation), from ‘divine’ things (glory, triumph, invincibility, and power.)”

Rather in a cruciform faith, they intersect.

The sacred and the secular, the sacred and the profane intersect this week, and the result is messy, the result is death, but the result is also everlasting life – God’s abundant love.

The sacred and the secular, the sacred and the profane intersect daily in our lives.

Those stories that Debie Thomas said we might hear in Holy Week, the stories of “friendship and betrayal, fervor and futility, hope and humiliation” – they are the very substance of our lives – the very things that fill our days, the very things that keep us up at night, the very things that God has experienced in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ connecting you in the smallest and greatest of moments to the incredible moment when Jesus, too, suffered; when Jesus, too, died; when Jesus, too, rose from the dead.

That isn’t to say that in moments of great joy that Jesus isn’t present – those moments are equally important and Jesus’ presence is equally true.

It’s sometimes harder to remember in the moments of our frustration, in the moments of our anxiety, in the moments of our “how on earth is this going to come together?” that God IS abundantly present.

We live a cruciform life at the intersections of joy and hardship, scarcity and abundance, life and death, secular and sacred.

The cross is the shape of the torturous device that took the life of Christ – it is also the shape of the life that Christ took on when, as the Son of God, he walked this earth and healed and loved God’s people.

The cross is the shape that was marked on our foreheads in our baptisms with holy oil – the cross is also the shape of our lives as Christ meets us on our journeys.

Holy Week is a reminder that we, like Jesus, live the way of the cross every day of our lives.

And Holy Week is an invitation to live the way of the cross every day of our lives.

If only that oil at our baptisms had retained the ability to glow – like a Christian disciple batman signal on our foreheads – so that we would be reminded of our cruciform faith at all times in our daily lives, and so that others would also know that we are Christian.

Our cruciform faith is not only a reminder that God is with us in our lives it is a reminder that God has called us to a cruciform life – a life that welcomes and acknowledges the intersection of the holy and the mundane, the sacred and the secular.

A cruciform faith influences who and how we are in the world *because* God is always meeting us where we are in the world.

We carry our crosses into the world to live at the intersection of our faith and the “real world”.

Our cruciform life expects that we show up for our neighbors, that we lead with grace and love, that we care about what is happening in the world.

Debie Thomas writes “The cross is about shaking things up. The cross is about rattling the system to its core. The cross is about enduring whatever might happen to us when we confront, resist, and protest the injustices we see around us.”

The crosses on our foreheads may no longer glisten, but I feel its power.

Holy Week is a reminder that we, like Jesus, live the way of the cross every day of our lives – God meeting us in our insecurities and our joys, in death and in life.

And Holy Week is an invitation to live the way of the cross every day of our lives - to acknowledge God active in the world and to bring God’s loving grace where there is pain and need.

Perhaps you will also perceive it this week.

May this week – the holiest of weeks in our tradition – be to you a blessing.

Amen.