

“A Passion Sonata” (Matthew 21:1-11)

A Sunday Devotional

By Fred Beck

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**Prayer for Illumination** (Passion/Palm Sunday): Eternal God, whose word silences the shouts of the mighty: Quiet within us every voice but your own. Speak to us through the suffering and death of Jesus Christ that by the power of your Holy Spirit we may receive grace to show Christ’s love in lives given to your service. Amen. (*Book of Common Worship*, PCUSA)

**Introduction:** “Sonata-Allegro Form” is a musical form that composers have used for centuries as a basic structure, within which they create various kinds of music, such as symphonies and sonatas – like Beethoven’s *Appassionata Sonata*, for example. Well, in this week’s devotional, I would like to talk a bit about Palm Sunday and its ensuing story of Passion using that structure, which generally consists of: Exposition (in which the composer presents musical themes); Development (in which the composer expands upon those themes); Recapitulation (in which the composer re-states the themes in various ways); and Coda (in which the composer wraps it all up). I do hope that this little devotional resonates with “music” in the hearts and minds of you, dear Guilford Park Presbyterian readers. So....

**Exposition:** In his book, Simply Jesus, N.T. Wright, one of the world’s leading Bible scholars, describes Jesus’ Palm Sunday procession as a coming together of what I would call, three “storms,” that rumble in the background of the story. One of the lectionary texts from Matthew for this day presents that story of Palm Sunday. Other texts from Matthew for this day present the story of Jesus’ passion – hence the designation, “Passion/Palm Sunday” for this day in the PCUSA church calendar.

The three “storms” in today’s lectionary texts are these: (1) The power and presence and dominance of the Roman Empire in the early first-century A.D.; (2) The Jewish expectation of a Messiah like King David – a Messiah who would come and throw out the bad guys and take over the place; and (3) The way of Jesus, who comes as the “Kingdom of God come near” – a Kingdom quite unlike either the powerful Roman one, or the hoped-for-powerful Jewish one.

The latter “storm” is the subject of this little devotional, as I take a look at what happens on Palm Sunday, as well as its ensuing story of Passion. In the process I hope to touch upon a few themes: Humility – Surrender – Suffering/Joy. I see those themes swirling in the middle of that third “storm,” and I believe they have something to say to us all as we continue the mission of Jesus – as Jesus calls us disciples to help bring about the Peaceable Kingdom of God on earth.

**Development:** All of the gospels include an account of Jesus' Palm Sunday parade into Jerusalem – although the gospel of John is the only one that refers to “branches of palm trees.” You may have noticed as you read the story in Matthew that Matthew reports a donkey and a colt (two donkeys), and Jesus sits on “them,” – and you may have wondered about this. Well, it seems that Matthew, or some transcriber, is a little mixed up about Zechariah 9:9, which says: “Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” Zechariah does not use the word, “and,” to describe two animals. Zechariah is writing Hebrew poetry, which often repeats a thought, word, or phrase for emphasis. There is one animal. Perhaps there has been a transcription error or misunderstanding of Hebrew poetry or.... In any case, Jesus surely rides into town on a donkey.

And what a contrast it is to what folks likely expect in the context of the early first century. They likely expect a king-like messiah-figure to ride into town on a big white horse, right? – Surely not a donkey.

But the donkey is intentional. The donkey is an actor in an acted-out parable by Jesus. The way of Jesus is completely unlike either the Jewish expected way, or the Roman powerful way. Jesus' way is the way of humility. Jesus' way is the way of surrender to what is. Jesus' way is the way of suffering/joy. Jesus' way is the way of the “kingdom of God” on earth.

As for humility, I hear the words of Paul in his letter to the Philippians: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.”

As for surrender (closely related to humility), I continue the words of Paul, as he quotes from an early Christian hymn: “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 of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to point of death – even death on a cross.”

As for suffering/joy, I bring to mind words from that old hymn: “See, from his head, his hands, his feet, sorrow and love flow mingled down; did e'er such love and sorrow meet, or thorns compose so rich a crown?” Jesus' surrender to the cross leads to this “mingling” of sorrow and love (or, sorrow and joy). The cross is the divine place upon which suffering is filling that place – but so does love (joy) fill that place. This is the non-dual nature of the way of Jesus – the way of suffering/joy. And love (joy) is stronger than death. This is the ultimate way of Jesus. This is the kingdom of God “on earth as it is in heaven.”

**Recapitulation:** The “storms” to which I referred in the “Exposition” of this “Passion Sonata” are still present in our contemporary life. Aside from the obvious “storm” of this coronavirus that has taken over our lives, the three first-century storms continue: (1) The presence and dominance of all of the secular “empires” in this world; (2) Many and varied “expectations” in religions – at least, in Christianity – of someone to come again (i.e., Jesus) and throw out the bad guys and take over the place; and (3) The continuing way of Jesus, as the kingdom of God that has already come – and is calling us to carry on the mission of Jesus and help build the kingdom of God on earth.

We do this in a number of ways – including those three themes of humility, surrender, and suffering/joy that are the focus of this devotional as they apply to Palm/Passion Sunday. And I believe those themes are particularly poignant in the middle of this coronavirus storm.

Humility as “other-centeredness” is the teaching of Paul, and shows us a particularly relevant way of dealing with the winds of this coronavirus – as untold people are reaching out and helping others, sometimes at great risk to their own lives. The way of Jesus is humility.

So is surrender. The thrust of this Palm Sunday parade by Jesus is surrender. And by surrender, I mean that surrender is surrender to what is – acceptance of what is – acceptance to what is in any given moment, without judging the goodness or badness of what is in any given moment. What is, is just...what is! One can certainly resist what is (like coronavirus) – and do all in one’s power to transform what is – but the first step is to surrender to what is. This is having the same mind in us that was in Christ Jesus, as Paul writes.

The third theme – suffering/joy – is little trickier – and a lot more difficult to emulate. Our human minds tend to dwell in a sea of dualism. That is, in our minds there is either suffering – or joy. Not both at the same time. But Jesus dwells in a sea of non-dualistic thinking and action. It is not “either-or” for Jesus – it is “both-and.” This is what it means when we embrace the suffering to which the Passion of Jesus points, while at the same time know the joy (love) of the Risen Christ. We are emulating the “mind of Christ” when we surround whatever suffering we or others experience with the energy of mindfulness of the real presence of God – the Holy Spirit that is with and within us all – all the time – no matter what – including the reality of the coronavirus.

Well, that concludes my brief “Passion Sonata” – with its structure like Beethoven’s *Appassionata Sonata* (get it?). I hope the “music” resonates in some small way with your life, and perhaps helps you see Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey in a new light, and perhaps inspires you to continue your discipleship journey with “the mind of Christ.”

**Coda:** Normally, we celebrate the Lord's Supper on this first Sunday of the month, and Palm/Passion Sunday is an especially appropriate time to do so – as we remember Jesus, experience (in various ways) Jesus' presence in the bread and “wine,” and look for Jesus to come again. Various Christian denominations have their “rules” regarding the carrying out of the Lord's Supper, and they all require “hands-on” celebrations – impossible at the moment, of course. So, some are simply not doing it. Others (like the PCUSA) are “bending” the rules in order to do some sort of virtual communion.

My suggestion, in terms of this written devotional, is to not worry about rules, and, instead, take time to eat mindfully, understanding that all food comes from God's good creation – and as you eat, spend some time remembering Jesus, experiencing the presence of Jesus as the Spirit with and within you, and looking ahead with faith, hope, and love – and know that the greatest of these is love – for nothing can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

**Blessing:** The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of God's Son, Jesus Christ our Lord; and the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, remain with you always. Amen.