

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God of our joys and our sorrows, we come to these walls to engage both. We celebrate in being community together, we celebrate the health to be among our brothers and sisters. Yet, we carry weights upon our hearts of personal struggles and communal struggles. Help us see these pains in our neighbors and be a loving presence.

After the observation of Lent, we recognize the most important week in the whole year. God, we want to leap forward to Easter day, but we cannot and should not. The journey is not there yet. The Holy Week of hopefulness, mystery, and darkness awaits us, walk with the Christ as he enters the gates of Jerusalem, walks the streets, proclaims the new covenant at the Passover meal, is betrayed, goes on trial, and is crucified. Walk with us, God, as we go through the naturally dark parts of our lives and the dark paths we choose to tread in order that we may grow and become the best followers we can be. Let us not shirk off this responsibility in favor of ease but take it on with determination with our whole community. Let us truly find what it means to live "Victory in Jesus" as we understand the celebration, mystery, and the darkness that are a necessary part of the journey as well. We pray all these things in the name of the one we walk with in this week of uncertainty, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray together...

SERMON

One summer, I lived in Omaha, NE to take part in a Peace with Justice Internship with the Nebraska United Methodist Conference. In the place where I stayed, I would drive by one church whose name made me cringe. It was called "Victory! Church," with "Victory" having an exclamation point behind it. It made me cringe because I felt there was a lot of baggage attached to that name. Overall, it was a misrepresentation of who we are meant to

be as Christians. It seemed to proclaim to me Christian joy without any responsibility and struggle. It seemed to proclaim that the Church was about ease instead of a journey that sometimes requires pain and distress. "Victory! Church" seemed to be about a world that has all of Easter and none of Holy Week.

That is an unfaithful take on the life of the Christian. True, we are Christians because we proclaim victory in Jesus. Victory in Jesus, though, often seems cheap when we preach a gospel that focuses on happiness and personal salvation. Simply the journey of understanding this man Jesus Christ requires a lot of us, and this is the journey we must engage to discover true and lasting Victory in Jesus. Holy Week is a small representation of what this journey of Jesus Christ is. Holy Week is about the lessons that lead to the new day of Easter. Ultimately, Holy Week AND Easter together, not simply Easter, create true Victory in Jesus. In this, we can redefine "Victory in Jesus" through three days in Holy Week. In these days, we seek Palm Sunday hopefulness, Maundy Thursday mystery, and Good Friday darkness.

We begin this complicated week on a high note. Jesus comes into Jerusalem amidst praise and welcome. His entry, according to the book *The Last Week* by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, mocks royal entry. He's symbolically taking down the authorities and saying something new: their power is meaningless. The people praised Jesus with such radiance because they had hope that this man was going to change things immediately. This man was going to overthrow the Romans and life was going to be far different. As we know, it didn't happen that way, so they were disappointed. Was their hope faulty, or did they create a hope for themselves?

The calling of the Christian life is a life of hopefulness. And hopefulness is not cheap, it's not an offhand belief, but lives deeply in the fact that God is a God that is with us. Sometimes that hopefulness can break apart due to some circumstance in our lives. Something happens that we don't expect, a loss, a realization, anything in which we felt our hopefulness attached, that hope can shatter. We can think that God has failed us. It can seem ungrounding, but it's also the opportunity to figure out where our hopefulness is rooted. I imagine this was the case when so many attached their hopefulness to this Jesus who they thought was going to be their warrior. Instead, he didn't take on the Romans by force, didn't overthrow them, but died at their hands like a criminal. Was their hopefulness attached to a rebellion with this man at its head or were their hopes attached to the greater message of God? In our case, it's difficult to sometimes see where our hopefulness can be attached. It can be difficult to see when we put our faith not in God but in the way we sometimes interpret scripture. If we interpret it in such a way that nothing bad can ever happen to us because we worship God, we will be disappointed in this complicated world. Our calling is to learn, to be open, and to root our hopefulness in the person of God alone. Everything else can disappoint us, but God will never disappoint us.

On Maundy Thursday, we are presented with a mystery. What are these mysteries? It has nothing to do with any crime dramas you see on TV, and Sherlock Holmes won't help you hear either. "This Holy Mystery," tells us that the early church used the word "Mysterion," which we translate as mystery, for the sacraments. The sacraments are some mysteries we are presented with in the Church because they reveal things to us that our reason cannot deduce by itself. They are outward signs of grace. Christ himself was a sacrament, in that he was a sign of grace to us and provides us with understanding that

transcends what we can deduce by our reason. Whenever we partake in a sacrament, we partake in a mystery. Baptism, it says, is our initiation sacrament into the Christian life. Through these ideas, Communion is how we maintain energy for the journey, says “This Holy Mystery.” It’s a rededication to the cause. The bread is broken, the cup is shared, and nothing is the same anymore.

What exactly is the bread and the cup we partake? Do we side with Catholic theology of transubstantiation, that the bread and cup become the actual Body and Blood of Jesus Christ at one point in the service? Are we to take on something more of Luther’s belief of consubstantiation, that the bread and the cup take on the physical presence of Christ without actually becoming the Body and Blood? Are we to follow Zwingli’s belief that it’s only symbolic? The United Methodist belief I consider a faithful middle way. Through our partaking, we believe that Christ is present with us, and these elements are tangible signs of Christ’s grace for and with us. We partake so that we may become the Body of Jesus Christ, the way that Christ works in our world; we become sacrament to the world to heal its wounds and tend its needs.

We find a greater sense of its sanctity when we take on Holy Communion with utmost reverence, for we need it to keep up the energy for the journey. I seek to engage the ceremony of communion with recognition of its meaning. I ask us to come forward to receive the elements because, in the same way, we have to follow God’s calling in action. I intentionally hand the bread to you because, with communion being a sign of grace, we receive grace; we do not take grace. I call it “The Bread of Life,” for it is meant to be empowering to us on our walk with the Lord. It is meant to reenergize life into us. And it is always an us, not an I. Jesus is giving us a remembrance his presence and his mission, and

we partake in it together and are energized to act on it together. It opens us to a greater connection. It allows us to partake in grace God freely gives us. All of this is a mystery, and that mystery is another piece that feeds victory.

After the hopefulness of Palm Sunday and the mystery we engage with Maundy Thursday, we must turn to the darkness of Good Friday. Christ suffers and dies and sends all followers to the depths of darkness and hopelessness. When we think about the heights of happiness and the lows of absolute darkness, our thought shifts to something that incorporates the spectrum like sports. Nevertheless, in that small arena where there is no eternal consequence we find some life lessons. My favorite team of all time is the 1985 Chicago Bears, who had little trouble getting to Super Bowl XX and dominating the New England Patriots. How they got to that season was a different story. In 1984, the Bears had gone from a bad team to the playoffs. They played the San Francisco 49ers in the NFC Championship game, one game short of the Super Bowl. The 49ers did their best to absolutely embarrass the Bears, winning 23-0. The 49ers told the humiliated Bears, "Next time, bring your offense!" The Bears took this pain to heart and came back for the 1985 season with more motivation. Their story on the documentary *America's Game* said that they could not have gone into the 1985 season ready to do what they had to do unless they had gone through that humiliation. It was not an eternal defeat; it was a lesson that they used to make themselves better. The darkness comes, and we have a choice: take it and make ourselves better, or concede defeat.

All of the dark times in our lives are not necessarily created equally. There is the darkness that comes naturally, and there is the darkness we should avoid. We recognize there is a time for darkness in our lives when it is natural, like the loss of a loved one or

when we are on a path of discernment and learning. There is also a time when darkness should be avoided. All too often, bad theologizing has told us that because Jesus suffered, we should consider suffering a good thing at all times. Women abused by their husbands should hold steadfastly because Jesus suffered. That is not the example of Jesus. Jesus is about life-giving, and those situations are about limiting life. There are times to grow, and there are times when darkness is intolerable and should be fought. In those times when we must sit in the darkness, we have difficult questions. "My God my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus calls out. Sometimes we feel like God has abandoned us; sometimes we feel like we are responsible for our pains and are being punished. It is the calling at the time to live deeply into the hopefulness that God is with us and God walks with us, even in the darkest of times. Although we feel so, we are never truly alone.

When we think about all these things, we arrive at a new definition of "Victory in Jesus." Victory in Jesus does not mean that Jesus did all the work so we can rest comfortably. It means that we walk the same journey that he walked. It means we live in faithful hopefulness, feed on the mystery of the sacraments, and walk into darkness as he did. Victory in Jesus is a long journey that goes up and down, not about being happy at all times. Holy Week is difficult because it is not about happiness. This is a point we must consistently hear in our culture because we are just too tied up in being happy. But when it comes down to it, we shouldn't want happiness. We should want more. Happiness I consider being of-the-moment, temporary, a quick fix. When do we hear about happiness in the Bible? We don't! Instead, we hear something about joy. But that's for next week.

Hopefulness, mystery, and darkness are necessary to understand how we live in Victory in Jesus. Faithful hopefulness roots itself in God alone in a complicated world.

Mystery, especially that of the Eucharist, roots us in the ministry of Christ. Darkness roots us in growth and leads us to experience the joys that come from faithful learning. This victory doesn't promise us shining happy days, but God does promise one thing. As with Christ in Holy Week, God walks with us through the pains and uncertainties of Holy Week to discover the newfound joy of Easter. When we take hold of the goodness of God's promises and the community that surround us, we will discover that we have the strength to walk through our own personal Holy Weeks and, maybe, we will find a new Easter around the corner. Amen and Amen.