

"All glory, laud and honor, to the redeemer king to whom the lips of children made sweet hosannas ring!" Palm Sunday makes my heart sing- to walk alongside the children as we process in, waving our palm branches, to hear familiar hymns of praise, to imagine the parade so long ago in which people with jubilation shouted for joy as Jesus went into Jerusalem on a colt. It feels so good to praise Jesus.

Our epistle reading from Philippians includes similar praise. An uncharacteristic literary form for Paul, this poetry is considered to be an ancient hymn. As we know, Paul was never at a loss for words, leading scholars to believe that he may have been quoting a community known hymn here, to connect with his audience. Whatever the reason, these brief verses beautifully describe the entire Christ event- his incarnation, his servant life, his death and his glory, with very few words.

It feels good to hear the triumphant, familiar verses: Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father." (2:9-11). We like the Palm Sunday processional music; we like this scripture because we like the triumph. We like to acknowledge the glory of Jesus; Jesus' compassion, servant-leadership and power. We do not, however, like to think about the suffering of Jesus, also named in today's Scripture: "...he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:7b).

But, unlike those at the parade 2000 years ago, we know that the joy of the parade quickly fades and is followed by suffering. We know that the same people who shout Hosanna! on Sunday shout crucify him! on Friday. And we know that with those shouts, our Lord and Savior is taken to a humiliating, excruciating death. And we know that Jesus, in his human form, let it happen. He chose to "become obedient". He chose to completely empty himself for humanity. For all of us. For you and for me. On this Sunday particularly we do not like to think about Jesus' descent of love-- from riding high on a colt to plunging down to the depths dying on a cross.

But friends, for our earlier praise to be more than pretty empty words we must think about this descent into suffering, because this descent is not just a consequence of pushing against Roman authorities, it was the core choice of Jesus' existence. Whether we like to talk about it or not, Jesus' descent and suffering is essential to the integrity and depth of our faith and of our praise.

Our Lenten One Church/One book selection, *Ordinary Grace* by William Kent Krueger, dwells in the depths of suffering. On its first page the Greek playwright Aeschylus is quoted: "He who learns must suffer. And even in our sleep pain, which cannot forget, falls drop by drop upon the heart, until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God." The meaning of this descriptive passage unfolds as you read the next 306 pages.

The story is set in the small town of New Bremen, Minnesota in 1961. It is told by Frank Drum, from his perspective forty years later, recalling the summer when he was thirteen years old. Frank is the middle child- his older sister Ariel would be going off to Julliard in the fall, and his younger brother Jake is eleven and his constant tag along. Frank's father, Nathan, is a

Methodist minister who serves congregations in New Bremen and two neighboring small towns and Frank's mom, Ruth is a brilliant pianist and singer who uses her musical gifts to lead local choruses. Before I continue, a brief spoiler alert- as the churchwide discussion of this book is today I will share details of the story. I won't give away the ending though, for any of you still reading.

As Frank recounts multiple violent and untimely deaths occurring that summer-most significantly the tragic murder of his sister Ariel- he also describes how each of family members' worlds is turned upside down and filled with deep suffering. Pain falls drop by drop upon their hearts unrelentingly and their relationships with God and one another are put to the ultimate test. During this testing time, it is the suffering of Jesus just before his death that Nathan relates to. Connecting to Jesus not as divine one but as fully human one, who endured moments of betrayal before the crucifixion enables Nathan to maintain relationship with his Lord.

In his sermon preached the Sunday after Ariel's death, Nathan reflects:

"It isn't Easter, but this week has caused me to think a lot about the Easter story. Not the glorious resurrection that we celebrate but the darkness that came before. I know of no darker moment in the Bible than the moment Jesus in his agony on the cross cries out, 'Father, why have you forsaken me?' Darker even than his death not long after because in death Jesus at last gave himself over fully to the divine will of God. But in that moment of his bitter railing he must have felt betrayed and completely abandoned by his father, a father he'd always believed loved him deeply and absolutely. How terrible that must have been and how alone he must have felt. In dying all was revealed to him, but alive Jesus like us saw with mortal eyes, felt the pain of mortal flesh, and knew the confusion of imperfect mortal understanding. I see with mortal eyes. My mortal heart is breaking. And I do not understand" (Krueger 2013 194).

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I do not understand...what could have motivated pilot Andreas Lubitz to fly the Germanwings plane which he co-piloted, filled with 149 other people, directly into the French Alps. All on board were killed. My mortal heart is breaking for the loved ones of those passengers and crew members who are in the depths of suffering, stunned by their sudden loss.

Horrific events occur, over and over again. The question we always hear is where is God in all of this? Where is God in this plane crash? Where is God in the messy divorce and tortuous custody battle? Where is God in the cancer diagnosis?

Our Scripture affirms for us that God *is with us* in the darkness:

Where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there, if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there....

If I say surely the darkness shall cover me and the light around me become night, even the darkness is not dark to you; the darkness is as light as day, for even the darkness is light to you.

(Psalm 139: 7-, 11-12)

God *is with us* in death:

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me" (Psalm 23: 4, KJV).

"And, being in human form he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross" (Philippians 2: 7b-8).

These holy words undergird our faith as suffering shakes it; when a void created by great loss is filled only by drops of our own pain and our faith seems to have been also lost in the suffering.

The good news is that these drops of pain have the miraculous ability to transform us. The good news is that from these drops comes wisdom and through the awful grace of God miracles abound.

Jake Drum and his family experienced a miracle through his utterance- stutterfree- of a most ordinary grace: "Heavenly Father, for the blessings of this food and these friends and our families, we thank you. In Jesus' name, Amen" (Krueger 2013 270). An ordinary grace through which an extraordinary miracle came. With Jake's gift of clear speaking came hope for the future- a hope that it could be a good future, beyond suffering and pain.

Jennifer Mewett, sister of church member Karyn, experienced a miracle three months ago when she received a new set of lungs, and with them a second chance at life. For decades she fought for each breath, knowing that, without a transplant it was a battle she would ultimately lose.

Jennifer now gloriously breathes fully and deeply, and her future is bright.

A week from today, our journey into suffering and pain concludes with the miracle of resurrection! Jesus, completely dead Friday night is Risen, he is risen indeed! And with his rising, confirmation from God that death does not have final victory-in the end, God wins. Suffering is not the end, but peace and joy reign.

Today we commence our pilgrimage, this morning we sing brightly and with delight. Next Sunday we will sing as changed people, transformed by the awful grace of God and ever grateful. Truly what a wondrous love it is, God's deep, abiding love for us.

"What wondrous love is this, that caused the Lord of Bliss to bear the dreadful curse for my soul...When I was sinking down God laid aside his crown for my soul...To God and to the lamb who is the great I AM, while millions join the theme I will sing, and when from death I'm free I'll sing and joyful be, and through eternity I'll sing on" (What Wondrous Love, #215).

I'll sing on, I'll sing on. Gracious God, we believe, help our unbelief. Amen.

Works Cited

Krueger, William Kent. 2013. *Ordinary Grace*. Atria: New York, New York.

"What Wondrous Love Is This" In *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal*. 2013. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, Kentucky. #215.