

“Participating in God’s Sufferings”

Rev. Amanda Hendler-Voss

First Congregational UCC

Washington, DC

April 5, 2020

Will you pray with me? *May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O God, for you are our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

I once shared communion with a youth group and people living on the streets. After a discussion on justice with the Rev. Amy Cantrell, founder of an intentional community called BeLoved House, the youth engaged in service, and then we shared worship. And just as Pastor Amy was preparing to break the bread, just as she told how Jesus, in his last supper with the disciples, took the bread, blessed it, broke it and shared it saying, “This is my body, broken for you,” a woman named Biscuit hopped the fence and interrupted. “I gotta get my bread, y’all,” she said. “Today I’m going home.” As she tore a huge chunk from the loaf, she testified that she left home an addict, but now she was healthy. She said this while shoving bread in her mouth and, unsure what to do with the cup, she took a long swig and grinned, offering her gratitude.

Her disruption of the liturgy, her hunger for bread for the journey, her exuberant agency in tearing the bread and gulping the juice reminded me of what communion is truly about. God’s provision for our homegoing. A feast of gratitude, as our stories pour forth about how we were lost, but now we’ve been found. Communion began as a meal that marked home. In that borrowed upper room, Jesus was surrounded with friends in a Passover feast so tender that he washed the feet of those who would abandon him, betray him, deny him. Imagine the longing on his face when he urged them to remember him, after his death, like this. Loving them. Breaking bread with them. One last supper, a meal whose ceremony was so familiar it harkened back to Passover meals with his mother, father, and siblings. A meal that signaled home to the soul. How fitting that we mark that meal today from our own homes, knit together by the Spirit despite the distance. May this meal, unlike any communion you’ve likely ever experienced, also be a feast so tender that its memory is seared into our hearts. May it be, for us, provision for the journey ahead.

Today we enter Holy Week, our last leg on the Lenten journey. It’s a week that begins with Jesus’ pilgrimage into Jerusalem and ends with his death and resurrection. It is the most important week in the Christian calendar. This year it coincides with one of the most difficult weeks in American life as we face the sickness and death born of the COVID-19 pandemic. Palm Sunday marks Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem for the celebration of Passover, a commemoration of the exodus of the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt. Jesus entered the city among throngs of Jews who crowded the corridors of the city. One scholar notes that the city’s population would swell from 50,000 to over 200,000 during this holy festival, quite the opposite of the empty streets of the world’s busiest cities today. And because the liberating story of the exodus reminded the occupied Jews of their hunger for self-determination, the Roman state made a show of force during Passover—an imperial entry into the city with full Roman guard as the governor made his presence known. This march reminded the gathering pilgrims of the power of the Empire. While the Roman guard invaded Jerusalem mounted on powerful steeds, Jesus made his way on the other side of town, riding a humble colt in the company of poor pilgrims. There were two marches into the city that Passover. One was flashy and powerful, the antics of an oppressive regime. The other was humble and peaceful, an alternative pilgrimage in remembrance of God’s liberating acts and in defiance of Rome’s military might.

As Jesus passed by, the burgeoning crowds spread palm branches on the road, shouting, “Hosanna!” The word Hosanna translates as: save us, and the sojourning Jews did not use it lightly.

Even more treasonous, the crowd shouted, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” The jubilant crowd used political language to describe Jesus’ movement. From Egyptian slavery to Roman occupation, God’s people were weary of political subjugation. And they imagined that Jesus—with his fearless critique of authority, his tender care for those on the margins, his ability to draw crowds and inspire change—they imagined that this Jesus would be their new king. And so they made quite a spectacle as he rode into Jerusalem—so much so that his adversaries plotted his demise.

This is where we find Jesus in our text today—awakened to the terminal condition of his life, walking, eyes wide open, toward the cross. He must have known the powers that be would come for him. He must have known the religious elite would rage against his law of love; the political authorities would cry treason; the soldiers would turn imperial force against him. I imagine it was a bittersweet journey into the holy city—in the thick of the noise, the crush of the crowd, among dancing palms, shouts of Hosanna and faces softened with devotion he knew the people’s love, even as he saw their betrayal. Did he imagine that soon he would drop to his knees in the garden, begging God to release him from the burdens of suffering and death? Did he foresee his arrest, the Judas-kiss of betrayal? Did he know they would all abandon him in his hour of need? Was his heart heavy with the grief of the denial he knew Peter would proclaim?

In his final hours, as Jesus knelt in prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, he uttered the words—stay awake! And when the disciples fell asleep, he asked—could you not watch with me for one hour? Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “That is a reversal of what the religious person expects from God. Humanity is summoned” to participate in the suffering of Christ. “In so doing,” he continued, “we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God—watching with Christ in Gethsemane.” Watching with the body of Christ. Participating in each other’s sufferings. To throw ourselves completely into the arms of God in this hour, we must stay awake.

The truth about resurrection which our culture denies is that you cannot get to new life without wading through death. You cannot know transformation without a measure of suffering. There is no way to Easter except through Good Friday, for resurrection follows crucifixion as surely as the new dawn rides in on the heels of deepest night. This truth is one we can profess to our children, but it’s a road you learn by walking it. There are moments when you find yourself walking the lonesome valley alongside another pilgrim for a time, then the paths diverge. The grief of loss, the pain of death is an utterly singular journey. And yet Jesus has walked it and accompanies us every step of the way.

Just before my thirty-first birthday, I learned of a contest sponsored by a favorite jewelry artist. She made a bracelet engraved with words from my wedding, and also my ordination ring, whose engraved words have long since worn away. Her contest: submit a few lines from your favorite poem, and you might win a free necklace with those words engraved on the pendant. In that season of life, my dad’s cancer had returned, but we were hopeful that he could manage the disease for years to come. The words I chose from a Mary Oliver poem were prophetic: “To live in this world you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing that your own life depends on it; and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.”

I won that contest and the week of my birthday, the necklace arrived, delicate and beautiful, with [Mary Oliver](#)’s words hanging just over my heart. I knew it was a gift that fell from heaven, but I had no idea how much I would need those words. I wore the necklace religiously that year, as my dad’s condition worsened, as he gave up precious things as nothing more than a freedom road home to God. I wore it as the breath of life heaved its way out of his body one blustery October evening. I wore that necklace so much that one day the pendant broke loose from its circular frame and fell off, leaving what looked like the opening of a tomb. An empty tomb, from which came a

bittersweet, beautiful new life that never would have existed absent the death and loss that came before it.

As we walk through Holy Week together, as we walk this lonesome valley, as beloved ones grow sick, as our world wrestles with grief, it feels like the rumblings of death that belie new life. It feels like the world is about to be remade, but not until we've come through the fire. Let this be a week when we watch with Jesus as he walks through his final days, watching with the suffering around the world who trudge through theirs. Good news is coming. New life is on the way. Stay awake. Amen.