



THE BIG QUESTION

April 14, 2019, Palm/Passion Sunday

Luke 23: 1-49

Douglas T. King, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

Can it happen to me? Is that all there is? What comes next? These are among the questions all of us ask at the graveside, according to the funeral director and poet, Thomas Lynch.¹ We began our day with a parade of youthful exuberance. There was so much ebullience and joy and life! And now we find ourselves at the parade's inevitable destination, joining the onlookers as Jesus hangs limply on the cross.

Can it happen to me? Is that all there is? What comes next? Gazing upon that corpse on the cross we think back on the life of Jesus; a man, vibrant, and strong, and so full of life that life's very abundance poured out of him and on to those around him. From him poured forth wisdom in his teaching, healing in his touch, and sustenance from his very presence. He lifted leprosy from ailing bodies; fed five thousand with table scraps; raised a daughter from the dead. And now this, a luminous life now lifeless. Can it happen to me? Is that all there is? What comes next?

On this Palm/Passion Sunday we are brought before the perpetual predicament of our mortality. Certainly there has been no one like Jesus in humanity's history. But then again, the outline of the story has been told since time began and will continue until time ceases to be. The rhythm of life plays out in many ways and yet one level always in the same way. From the cradle, if we are lucky, we grow and become strong. We venture out into the world. We learn and we laugh and we love. We strive and we cry and we overcome. Adventures are had. Careers are built. Families are created. In one way or another, we experience the agency of placing our stamp upon the world. But no matter how far flung our influence, no

* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.



matter the number of our achievements, or the depth of our impact on those around us, there will come a day when we will ask the questions. Can it happen to me? Is that all there is? What comes next?

The poet Christian Wiman asks his own question. “What will you stake your life on? What story?” In other words, what narrative will drive you and help you explain your own story. If we choose to stake our lives on the story we will hear this week, it will make all the difference in answering all of the previous questions.

We just heard Margaret read Luke’s account of Jesus’ final hours. We heard of accusations, and governing authorities holding court. We heard of Jesus being mocked and cries for crucifixion. We heard Jesus’ call for forgiveness for those demanding his death and words of promise for the criminals by his side. We heard Jesus’ final words on the cross and we heard the temple of the curtain torn in two. And we heard Jesus breathing his last breath.

The rest of this story will wait for next week, but what does the story of the death of the Son of God have to offer us and the questions we carry? Well, let’s deal with the most obvious question, yet the one in which we often have the most difficult time accepting the answer. Can it happen to me? Yes. Yes, it can and it will. We pray that it not be for many years, but each and every one of us will one day breathe our last. Regardless of the varying levels of denial we all possess in response to this reality, everyone who is born will die. May our final day come after celebrating our 120th birthday, playing tennis with our great, great, great grandchildren in the morning, having lunch with our friends, making love to our spouse in the afternoon and then gently falling asleep for a nap from which we do not awake. But it will come for us. Indeed it will.

It is the next two questions that are up for debate. Is that all there is? And, what comes next? In many ways these are questions perhaps best answered on Easter and today is not the day to peek ahead to what is to come. I would not want to steal Kim’s resurrection thunder. But in other ways, they are questions that are well informed by our portion of the story today.



If we began to review all of the twists and turns of this text many brunch reservations would have to be rescheduled. But a continual theme plays throughout the multitude of dramatic scenes. When Pilate and Herod question Jesus, demanding that he defend himself he has no desire to focus upon himself. When the women wail for him on the way to the cross, he does not turn his attention toward his plight but responds, saying, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and your children.” When they put him up on the cross he does not curse those who crucify him or curse his fate, he says, “Father forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” As he is dying, he offers not words of personal agony but words of hope for the criminals by his side, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” Only in his final words does he mention his own fate, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

So, if that is all there is, what is it with which we are left? What we are left with is a God who is incredibly, intensely, intently focused upon us and our ultimate welfare; a God so committed to us as to take on mortal form; so committed to us as to never lose sight of what we need, even on the way to the cross; so committed to us that even death itself is not too far to go for us.

I stand here in utmost certainty about the answer to “Is that all there is?” If we choose to stake our lives on this story, we can see death is not all there is. All there is, all that matters, is a divine love that remains ever focused upon each one of us; a love the breaches the divide between humanity and divinity; a love that will not be deterred from its concentration upon us regardless of the crisis at hand.

Blaise Pascal wrote, “We shall die alone.” Pascal was right about many things but perhaps not about this one thing. For this story paints us a picture of a God, who even from the cross never drops divine concern from us, never loses sight of us, never stops loving us. And in choosing to die for us has made the sacrificial decision to walk the path we all must walk. Our God joins us on every step of our journey, through our lives and even into death. Thus, we do not ever walk alone.



Overseeing our student minister program here at Brick Church for a number of years now, I serve as a reference for many of the students as they seek calls in the church. I get all of the usual questions during these phone call interviews. “What are the person’s strengths?” “What are their weaknesses?” All of us have asked these questions and been asked these questions as we have been a reference or contacted references. The final question is usually something akin to, “Is there anything else you believe it would be helpful for me to know about this person?” We have had many extraordinary student ministers over the years so I usually have something wonderful to say. But for some of them, I offer the highest compliment I can give. And it is this, if I were in a hospital bed I would want this person to come and visit me. Maybe for some of you that does not seem like that important a compliment, but there is none higher for me. As someone who has visited a good number of hospital rooms over the years and have seen how others visit hospital rooms, I can tell you there are all sorts of ways such visits are made. I will not go into all the ways that a visit can go wrong. But there is one way that a visit goes right. It is when the person visiting is capable of standing with you in the midst of your pain and vulnerability. They may not be in your shoes but they understand suffering, and in that moment with you, beside you on the journey.

In this story we have received today, this story we should stake our very lives upon, we receive the news that that is who our God is for us. We are given remarkable insight into our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. God, in Jesus Christ, has traveled the entire journey of mortal vulnerability, and suffering, and even unto death itself. And God, in Jesus Christ, never takes his eyes or concerned concentration from us no matter what may come.

Brush the palm branches and parades to the side. Leave the courtroom drama and raucous crowds behind. At the end of the day what we are left with is a God who is ever focused upon us in love; a God who has chosen to die for us. So, even at the end of all our days, we will not be alone. The one who gave us our first breath will be beside us when we breathe our last. That is all there is, and that is everything that is. And as for the question, “What comes next?,” I am sure we will learn more next week. But whatever comes next, I know who will be by our side.



Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Lynch, Thomas, *whence and whither: on lives and living*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2019, p.118.