



## FINDING JESUS

April 9, 2017, Passion Sunday/Palm Sunday

Matthew 21:1-9; Matthew 27:27-31; Philippians 2:5-8

Michael L. Lindvall, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

Theme: Christ's Passion is sign of God's presence with us in suffering.

---

*Give us sharp eyes and keen ears, O God, to see and hear the whole story, even the parts we'd sooner skip over. Give us hearts stout enough to follow our Lord every step of His way, even when we'd sooner lag behind. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.*

Every year in the weeks before Easter, cable TV channels offer up some "Jesus specials." They vary in quality and integrity. Some evidence faith; others skepticism. This year, CNN has been doing a rather nice series every Sunday night at 9 they call "*Finding Jesus.*" But it's not that series of programs I want to talk about this morning; rather it's one of the ways they've promoted it that intrigues me.

CNN does what many TV channels do to encourage people to watch their shows. They run these subscript banners on the bottom of the screen during other shows, telling you about programs that are coming up. CNN is mostly news, of course. So as I watched some CNN news these last weeks, I'd see, for instance, footage of those horrific mudslides in southern Colombia – hundreds of people buried alive – and underneath those images would suddenly pop up the words, "Finding Jesus." Or there'd be pictures of a tornado-ravaged little town in Oklahoma – a mother and child lost in the rubble – and underneath pop up the words, "Finding Jesus." Last week it was video of Syria – dead babies cradled in their parents' arms after Assad's sarin gas attack – and underneath those incredibly painful images appear the words, "Finding Jesus." If I'd watched CNN this morning I might have seen



the words “Finding Jesus” under images of those bombed Coptic churches in Egypt. Hold on to this juxtaposition; I’ll circle back to its eloquent irony later.

Today is not just Palm Sunday; it’s also Passion Sunday. The Palm Sunday part recalls Jesus’ joyful entrance into Jerusalem that we just reenacted with the children. I love it. Sweet babes in parents’ arms, 4-year-old boys who think palm fronds are actually swords. Second graders bopping younger siblings on the head with their palm, just because. The Palm Sunday part of today was unfolded in the first of the passages Mr. Armstrong read from the Gospel of Matthew. The Passion Sunday part of today remembers the last days of Jesus’ life – His arrest and trial, His torture, and finally His death on the cross. The Passion Sunday part was narrated in the second reading from Matthew. It was also poetically remembered in those verses from Philippians that formed the last of the three Scripture readings.

Folks generally prefer the *first part* of this Sunday over the second. It’s more agreeable to remember the crowd that shouted “hosanna” than the crowd that shouted “crucify.” But you just can’t come to the light of Easter morning without passing through the darkness of the cross. The story is incomplete without the whole story. And equally to the point, Good Friday and Easter is the whole story of how human *life* goes. We need to hear all of it, not only because it’s the whole truth about Jesus Christ. We need to hear the whole story because it’s the whole truth about life, life in this wounded and wonderful, brutal and beautiful world we live in.

When life confronts us with the hard realities of suffering and loss – whether it’s on CNN or in our own lives – people respond in radically different ways. People without faith tend to suggest that it’s all more-or-less meaningless. The universe is merely a God-empty mechanical machine – cogs of capricious viruses that feed on human tissue and random genetic mutations that make for tumors. It’s nasty dictators with big egos and bigger bombs. The average Joe is just getting from one day to the next. There’s no God *over* it. *There’s* no real purpose *in* it. So what do you do if this is your scheme of life? Well, I suppose you just accept the void of it all and grab all the gusto you can until your number’s up.



People who believe in God categorically reject such drear resignation. We who risk faith in spite of it all have solid responses to the brokenness of life. They're not tidy answers, mind you, but they're very powerful responses. The three central responses of the Christian faith to suffering are actually framed by the three central events of this coming week – Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter.

In a remarkable op-ed essay *The New York Times* ran two weeks ago today, a guy named Peter Wehner thought deeply about suffering in this world. Wehner is a Christian, but not a minister or a professional theologian. He's a political consultant of some ilk in D.C. Wehner began with several close-to-home stories that confront the reader with the harsher realities of life:

*“Last month,” he begins, “I checked in on a childhood friend whose 13-year-old son committed suicide last year after struggling with a brain injury. He told me, ‘I’ve stopped crying every day, which is a major transition.’”*

*“Another lifelong friend,” Wehner writes, “died of colon cancer. His wife wrote me, ‘I wish I could tell you that we are walking this journey with courage and faith...’”*

*“Two weeks ago,” he continues, “I spoke with a friend whose wife told him she no longer wanted to be married to him because of his relapse into alcoholism, which he described as a ‘deep, dark, struggle’ that robbed him of his personality.”*

*“So what, then” Wehner asks, “does Christianity have to offer in the midst of hardships and heartache?”*

He writes of three Christian responses. Without naming them as such, they are (in the out-of-order sequence of his essay) the Maundy Thursday answer, the Easter answer, and the Good Friday answer.



His first answer, the Maundy Thursday answer, is embodied in support of community, the community of the church, the church that forms as Jesus' followers sit together around that table in the Upper Room and share a meal. Wehner describes this first Christian response like this:

*"...the consolation that comes from being part of a Christian community – people who walk alongside us as we journey through grief, offering not pieties, but tenderness and grace, encouragement and empathy, and when necessary, practical help. (One can," he notes, "obviously find terrifically supportive friends outside the Christian community. My point is simply that a healthy Christian community should be characterized by extravagant love, compassion and self-giving.)"*

I see exactly this in our community, Brick Church. I see it when a prayer shawl that's been blessed by the prayers of a knitter is delivered to a new widow. I see it when the Senior High group prays for one of their members having a tough time at school. I see it when the Men's Bible Study surrounds one of their number with love and visits, phone calls and football games during a serious illness. That's the Maundy Thursday answer – the communion of the loving community.

Wehner next hints at the Easter response, what he names the *"eternal inheritance."* This is the core conviction of Christian faith that the last word is not death, but in a way beyond imagining, the last word is life, life eternal. This is the Easter promise that the *hard* road is not the *end* of the road. But no more of that now; that's for next Sunday.

The last response that Wehner speaks of in his essay is the one that's connected to this day, especially to its Passion Sunday edge. This is the day we begin to look toward the cross, toward the suffering and death of Christ and what it means for us when we are pressed hard by life. In his essay, Wehner notes that the Old Testament book of Isaiah describes the messiah as a *"'man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.'* We're told, *'by his wounds we are healed.'* For those of the Christian faith," Wehner says, *"God is a God of wounds... There is some solace,"*



he concludes, *“in knowing that while at times life is not easy for us, it was also hard for the God of the New Testament.”*

This last response to suffering – whether it be illness or loss, depression or fear – is the trust that God is with us at every step of the hardest journeys. That’s the promise embodied in the Passion story. Christ’s Passion – His suffering – is the enactment of the promise that God is with us in and through it all.

Planted as it is at the very center of the faith, the cross makes Christian faith radically and inescapably down-to-earth. By the cross, God declares in a way deeper than any words: *“There is no pain that you may bear that I have not borne; there is no darkness that can overtake you that I have not seen; there is no fear that might grip you that I have not known. All that might come to you, I have passed through. And when you come to it, you can trust that I am with you. I have been there.”* None of this explains away suffering; it’s simply the sign of the ages that we’re not alone. God is with us, through it all.

So back to CNN. I watched news footage of those horrific mudslides in southern Colombia, people buried alive, and underneath those images the words, “Finding Jesus.” I saw pictures of a tornado-ravaged little town in Oklahoma, a mother and child lost, and underneath the words, “Finding Jesus.” I flinched at the hard-to-watch video of dead babies cradled in the arms of their parents in northern Syria, and underneath those incredibly painful images, “Finding Jesus.” If I’d watched CNN this morning I might have seen the words “Finding Jesus” under images of those bombed Coptic churches in Egypt.

So where *do* you find Jesus? Right above those words on the screen, right there in the suffering of the world, right there in the pain of world that He loves, the world that He loved to death.

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*