

The One Who Knew Too Much

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Ancient Witness: John 12:9-19

A friend and I were talking about Holy Week, and he said that most people rarely hear that part of the story about “what happened in the middle.” By that he meant that the version of the story most people hear is this: Everybody had a big celebration, and then they lived happily ever after. They hear all the pomp and circumstance of Palm Sunday, and then they hear the joy of Easter Sunday. But they often fail to hear what happened in the middle. However, it is crucial that we all hear about what happens in the middle. So today I’m going to emphasize the passion side of Palm/Passion Sunday.

There’s a story of a man who found an eagle’s egg and put it in a nest of a barnyard hen. The eaglet hatched with the brood of chicks and grew up with them. All his life the eagle did what the barnyard chicks did, thinking he was a barnyard chicken. He scratched the earth for worms and insects. He clucked and cackled. And he would thrash his wings and fly a few feet in the air. Years passed, and the eagle grew very old. One day he saw a magnificent bird above him in the cloudless sky. It glided in graceful majesty among the powerful wind currents, with scarcely a beat of its strong, golden wings. The old eagle looked up in awe. “Who’s that?” he asked. “That’s the eagle, the king of the birds,” said his neighbor. “He belongs to the sky. We belong to the earth—we’re chickens.” So the eagle lived and died a chicken, for that’s what he thought he was.

You could say that Jesus tells us that we don’t have to be chickens. Society and culture tell us that we are bound to the earth, that we cannot fly. Jesus knew otherwise, and he spent his time telling people that they could spread their wings and soar in the sky on the breath of God. We don’t have to be selfish; we don’t have to be narrow; we don’t have to be mean; we don’t have to destroy the earth and ourselves; we don’t have to be filled with anxiety over success and material wealth. We don’t need to fear death. We can work for justice; we can transform the world; we can free ourselves from our culture of consumerism. We can be filled with an unshakable joy and peace.

But when you have grown up thinking that you are a chicken, when you’ve spent your time in a culture where everyone else is acting like a chicken, it’s pretty hard to be convinced that you are really an eagle. We may, in fact, *violently resist* this idea.

Jesus knew. Jesus knew some of the true motivations of the religious authorities—the scribes and Pharisees. He called them a brood of vipers, hypocrites. He knew they were mostly concerned with themselves. While outwardly they seemed good, they operated from their ego and out of fear.

Jesus knew. He knew that those who greeted him during his triumphal entry into Jerusalem wanted revenge; they wanted Roman blood. They were expecting a messiah who would be a warrior king, someone who would organize a revolt, bring armies together, and establish a military power again. They did not really want the kind of peace that he was bringing.

Jesus knew. He knew that even his own disciples would run away and scatter. He understood that when push came to shove that they would all leave and desert him. All his followers would.

Jesus knew. He would know that most would abandon his path and follow him when it suited their own purposes, that our intensity and our commitment would fade, and that the pull of society would be too strong and that we would resume thinking ourselves as chickens. If spirituality means waking up, Jesus knew that most fall back asleep again and again into the deep, thoughtless trance of life.

Jesus knew that he was an eagle—created in the divine image of God—called to live in the awareness of God’s love, a love that saves, that heals, that challenges—and he wanted others to come to this same realization that they, too, were not chickens but eagles.

Jesus knew. He knew about the systemic injustice, the violence of poverty and structural evil of his culture. He was aware that despite the booming colonial economy of the Roman Empire, life for the peasantry was increasing harsh, the top elite were getting richer while the bottom 99% were getting poorer. He knew that those in power would resist his vision of an alternative society of shared eating, healing for all, radical egalitarianism, and human contact without discrimination. He knew how this world would be run if God, and not Caesar, sat on the throne—a nation where everyone is valued and cared for and where priorities and budgets reflect this.

Jesus knew way too much. And this is why Jesus had to go. For the religious leaders, Jesus was someone who was going to blow their cover. It was not really that they thought he was an imposter, but it was that he saw through them that got them so riled up. He spoke the truth. And they could not hear that truth and remain who they were. He had to go.

And so, in my view, Palm Sunday is about one thing: our addiction to violence. It’s about the human propensity to believe that violence solves our problems, saves us, liberates us, makes our world whole.

In the past four decades we have witnessed in this country, largely because of a get-tough-on-crime mantra, a massive increase of those held in our jails and prisons, with the prison population exploding from 300,000 to 2.3 million! This huge increase has come mostly from people of color and the poor, and much of it is the result of the so-called war on drugs, unequally applied. We have become a mass incarceration state. Vast resources have been shifted from programs for social uplift, education and aid for the poor, to increases in police, jails and prisons.

Make no mistake, this is institutional violence. To subdue, arrest and imprison is violence. Sometimes it is necessary, but this nation is addicted to violence. It is out of control and is ruining our collective lives. They say, “When all you’ve got is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.” Our repressive state violence has become our default response, and it’s killing the soul of our country.

We are addicted to violence—to guns, to endless war and to prisons. We think that it will save us. It will not save us. We experience mass shootings in schools, supermarkets and salons, but refuse to ban assault rifles as we did from 1994 to 2005. We worship guns and violence. And it doesn’t seem to matter which political party is in power, the military budget continues to expand even in the midst of the crisis of the pandemic. And anyone who challenges this addiction will be discredited, marginalized or worse. As Walter Wink said, “Jesus died like all the others who challenged the Powers that dominate the world.”

Jesus challenged the empire's addiction to violence—depriving the poor from food and shelter, depriving workers from fair wages, mistreatment of the widows, the orphans and the immigrants. This is what Palm Sunday is about: Jesus was a *threat* to those in power and a *disappointment* to those who weren't.

Human beings have been so addicted to violence that we have even projected it upon God, and then *we've worshipped this violent God*. And one of the essential aspects of Jesus as a spiritual teacher was that he *broke the linkage between God and violence*. He challenged the belief that violence is the solution. This is why he died, because he saw violence not as the solution, but as the *problem*.

All week I've been asking myself the question, "Is suffering redemptive?" The traditional answer is "yes, we are saved by the suffering and death of Jesus." But I say, "no." We are saved and set free by *love*, not suffering, violence and death. We are made whole by an awareness of who we really are and a realization of the boundless, oceanic love, which is God.

I am drawn to what Christian feminist theologian, Delores Williams, said in her book, *Sisters in the Wilderness*. She argued that we are not saved by Jesus' death but by his life. It is through the life of Jesus that God has shown humankind "how to live peacefully, productively and abundantly in relationship." She continued, "There is nothing divine in the blood of the cross."

Jesus suffered and died, not because these things were good, but because he loved. He knew what this love asks us all to do, and this brought disapproval and violence upon him. And it is because God loves that God suffers. Like parents who suffer when their child is in pain, God feels our hurt and suffering because God loves and cares. We are made whole by God's suffering love.

But this has been considered heresy in the church. Christian orthodoxy has long held that God cannot suffer. This view has risen primarily from the Platonic and Aristotelian view that perfection excludes the possibility of suffering and change. So early church fathers, Tertullian, Clement, and Origen, argued against the idea that God suffered through Jesus. But the human story has always been whether we worship power and violence or love that is vulnerable to suffering.

Two thousand years ago, a great crowd heard what Jesus had done with Lazarus at nearby Bethany, so they rushed to the outskirts of Jerusalem to meet him. They shouted, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!" The King of Israel, they called him. They said this, and they took branches of palm trees with them.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, there is a story about when David was very secure as the king of the Southern Kingdom of Hebron, and the North was without a leader. So all the tribes of the Northern Kingdom went to David, and they said, "Help. Won't you please be our King?" They said, "Look, you are one of us. We are your flesh and blood." So, he agreed.

David was the ideal king: powerful, strong, and established by the Lord God Almighty. He was the religious, political, and military leader, all rolled into one. And what is the first thing that the might King David does? He marches his strong army, defeats the Jebusites, and marched triumphantly into Jerusalem, often called "the city of David."

Then, about 1,000 years later, here is Jesus, making his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, the city of David. And as he came in, the crowd shouted, “Hosanna to the King of Israel.” And in Matthew’s account it even says, “Hosanna to the Son of *David*.”

If you use your imagination, you can sense the excitement and expectation in the air. “This is it. Perhaps he’s the one, *another David* to set us free and defeat our enemy, who is Rome. Look, there he is, the next King of Israel! He has come to reclaim the capitol and the Temple!”

The crowd misunderstood. They expected a king of power, might and violence, not a king of love and forgiveness. They had expected a king, who with force, will make their *own particular nation* strong, not a king with compassion for *all* people. They simply misunderstood.

It says that what happened next was that when Jesus heard this, he went and found a young donkey and sat on it. It is almost as if this action shouted back to the crowd: “Here! Here is your king! No fancy chariots, no huge army, no swords, no spears, no guns, no tanks, no missiles. Here is your king!”

There is a story told by the great humanitarian and theologian, Albert Schweitzer, about a flock of geese that had settled to rest on a pond. One of the flock had been captured by a gardener who had clipped its wings before releasing it. When the geese started to resume their flight, this one tried frantically, but vainly, to lift itself into the air. The others, observing his struggles, flew about in obvious efforts to encourage him; but it was no use. Thereupon, the entire flock settled back on the pond and waited, even though the urge to go on was strong within them. For several days they waited until the damaged feather had grown sufficiently to permit the goose to fly. Meanwhile, the unethical gardener, having been converted by the ethical geese, gladly watched them as they finally rose together, and all resumed their long flight.

In Jesus’ teaching, we have an image of God that is vulnerable in a world that has contempt for weakness and vulnerability. We see a God who suffers, not because suffering is so great, but because it accompanies God’s love.

Jesus knew about this remarkable suffering love of God that can heal us, transform us and empower us. And as it turns out, he knew too much.