

“The Divine Drama”
April 14, 2019 (Palm Sunday)
by Rev. Dr. Eric Elnes

Scripture: Psalm 118:19-29; Matthew 21:1-11; Revelation 7:9-10; 19:6-9

I. Muscle Memory

*Come,
Come back!
Repent and come back again. Come!
Come,
whoever you are
infidel
fire-worshiper
idol-worshiper
Come!
Be not hopeless
in our court.
Even if you've broken your vows
a hundred times
Come,
come again.¹*

These lines bear eloquent witness to a God who loves us so much that God would even be willing to be hurt by us. Having broken our vows over and over and chased after other gods, this God does something no other god would do: stands at the doorway to welcome us into our true Home should we ever wake up and realize there is no place better to be. Clearly, the author gets the central message of Jesus and Christianity. Only, as Thursday's Center for Faith Studies lecturer, Dr. Omid Safi, pointed out, the lines were not written by a Christian, but by a 12th Century Muslim mystic named Baba Afzal Kashani.

It comes as a shock to some Christians that people of other faiths may experience God's love and forgiveness like Christians do. Of course, Muslims revere Jesus quite highly – more highly than many Christians, in fact. So one might argue that this mystic was

¹ While this quote above Rumi's shrine is often attributed to Rumi, it was actually penned by his contemporary, Baba Afzal Kashani.

simply riffing on Jesus. But this wouldn't explain the Acoma Pueblo community of Western New Mexico.

In a letter sent out to his subscription list recently, Franciscan monk and author Richard Rohr, spoke of a time when, as a young deacon in the Catholic church, he was sent to the Acoma Pueblo community. Upon his arrival, he was amazed to discover that many Catholic practices had direct indigenous counterparts. He found altars in the middle of mesas covered with bundles of prayer sticks. He noted how the people of the Acoma Pueblo sprinkled corn pollen at funerals just as priests did holy water, and how what Catholics were newly calling "liturgical dance" was the norm for the Pueblo people on every feast day. Rohr further observed how mothers would show their children to silently wave the morning sunshine toward their faces, just as Catholics learned to "bless themselves" with the sign of the cross, and how anointing people with smoldering sage was similar to waving incense at Catholic High Masses.

Rohr concludes that all these practices have one thing in common: "they are acted out, mimed, embodied expressions of spirit."

How could the Acoma Pueblo people, who had neither heard of Jesus nor encountered Christians at the time these practices were established, create practices that so closely echo classic Christian ones? As Rohr puts it, "The soul remembers them at an almost preconscious level because they are lodged in our muscle memory and make a visual impact. The later forms of more rational Protestantism had a hard time understanding this."

I love the idea that the soul has "muscle memory." Our souls remember a time before we were born when the distance between ourselves and God was not so great – at least the perceived distance. This deep memory creates an equally deep yearning for God, which is less a yearning for union than it is a yearning for re-union. Our soul knows what our home in God looks like and feels like, and it knows that its destiny is to be reunited with its Beloved.

Many Christians believe that if this is true, and the door to our true home in God is open for everyone, including non-Christians, then Jesus has no value for us. We may as well adopt the religion of the Acoma Pueblos, or the Hindus, or one of our Tri-Faith partners.

My response to this objection is quite simple: Why would you want to trade your faith in Jesus for that of any other religion if the way you discovered God's love and forgiveness, and *continually* re-discover it, is through Jesus and the community called by his name?

The question, for me anyway, is not which religion is the True religion and which is false. The question is, what religion tells the most compelling story of God's love and

forgiveness for you. By “compelling” I mean which story invites you to become a part of it? Which story makes your heart leap up and cry, “Home!” in such a way that you turn around and start heading there?

2. The Divine Drama

If you understand the world religions in terms of stories that billions of people find compelling enough to become a part of, rather than sets of beliefs that are either “right” or “wrong,” then you begin to see one of many reasons why the world religions can be so beautiful when they stay true to their stories. You can also begin to appreciate the deep significance of what Jesus is doing during Holy Week.

Many Christians believe that the events of Holy Week – Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday – are all part of a great work Jesus did in order to save the world, or at least those who believe in him as Lord and Savior. In other words, Before Jesus, the front door of our true home in God was shut. By suffering and dying for our sins on the Cross, Jesus opened that door for us. Even now, they say, the open door has a bar across it to prevent from entering those who don’t accept his sacrifice on their behalf.

Yet, if other great religions have a “muscle memory” of God’s astonishing love and forgiveness, then the doorway to salvation must be and has always been open. What Jesus did during Holy Week, and especially on the Cross, was not open the door but reveal the door to those who had not already found it, or thought they had no access to it.

Holy Week, therefore, isn’t a great “work” of Jesus, creating a new condition for humanity. Rather, it’s a great “drama” enacted by Jesus for the sake of revealing just how deep God’s love and forgiveness goes – for all of us, not just to self-proclaimed “chosen ones.”

Seen from another angle, Jesus is taking a story that is central to Judaism – the story of Passover – and he’s radicalizing it. He’s turning it into a compelling story not just for Jews, or Jewish insiders, but for all of those on the outside looking in.

Do you remember the story of Passover? It’s the one that has been told at Jewish Seder meals every year for the better part of 3,000 years, and will be told again at Seder meals on April 19th. The story is about oppressed Hebrews living in Egypt as slaves. After Egypt’s pharaoh had ignored warnings by Moses through signs and various plagues that destruction would come if he did not let God’s people go, God determined to kill every first-born son among the Egyptians but to spare the Hebrew children.

In order to distinguish between a Hebrew home and an Egyptian one (as if God couldn't tell the difference!), every Hebrew household was to slaughter a lamb and place its blood on the posts and lintels of their doorway. This way, the Spirit of God would see the blood and "pass over" the Hebrews and slaughter the Egyptian first-borns. This plague proved to be the straw that finally broke Pharaoh's back and the Hebrew slaves were freed – at least initially, but that's another story.

This story is a brutal one. Yet if you remember that it is a story, not precise historical fact, and that this story was written for the Hebrew people, not the Egyptian overlords, then perhaps you can start to see some of its power. The story speaks about a God who loves those who are oppressed and actively works to free them from bondage.

But there are problems with the story, even if it is "just" a story. If you are not an oppressed Hebrew slave, or a descendant of one, this story isn't meant for you. It's not even meant for you if you are Jewish but, for whatever reason, have been cast as an outsider by the Jewish community. For instance, the people the gospels identify as "prostitutes, tax collectors, and sinners."

If you are not Jewish, or a Jewish insider, you need a different story. Or at least, a more expansive one. This is exactly the story Jesus provides.

On Palm Sunday, Jesus starts the drama by entering Jerusalem in the same manner that a king of Israel would do when he is about to be coronated, especially if that king is also the Messiah. He is seated on a donkey, as the prophet Zechariah predicts. The people are waving branches in celebration of the king's coronation outside the city gate, as Psalm 118 describes.

Yet, by the time we get to Maundy Thursday four days later, this king has become a lamb. When Jesus celebrates the Passover at a Seder dinner with his disciples, he breaks bread and pours wine, telling his disciples that these are his body and blood, broken and shed for them. In other words, Jesus re-writes the Passover story, making himself the lamb whose blood will be shed.

Who will God "pass over" when Jesus's blood is shed? If the blood Jesus shed on the Cross is that of a King and a Messiah who is also the Passover Lamb, God "passes over" not just the innocent and oppressed, but also the guilty oppressor – those who are so guilty, in fact, that they killed God's very Messiah. If God would "pass over" their sin, then whose sin would God not pass over?

This is precisely the question Jesus wants you to ask! He intentionally enters the Jewish Passover story, triggering the "muscle memory" of God's love for the Jewish people (insiders, anyway), and turns it into a drama that is compelling for all people. Even those

who shed Jesus's blood are passed over! Can you hear Baba Afzal Kashani's poem in Jesus's grand drama spoken to even the Roman soldiers who nail him to the Cross? Or, can you hear Jesus speaking these words to you?

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III. The Divine Wedding

Since we are on the Tri-Faith Commons, I cannot end this sermon without adding one more thought, especially for our Jewish sisters and brothers. For two thousand years, the story of Christ's crucifixion has not been one that triggers their "muscle memory" of God's love and forgiveness. Rather, they've seen it as a condemnation of Jews and Judaism. Sadly, many Christians have interpreted it this way, too. What has caused particular heartache in the Jewish community is a couple of lines in Matthew's crucifixion account where Matthew writes:

When Pilate saw that he could do nothing [to stop the crowd from calling for Jesus' crucifixion], but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." Then the people as a whole answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" (Matthew 25:24-25)

Anyone who thinks that Matthew is specifically condemning Jews by putting these last words in the mouths of the Jewish people should consider one oddity before jumping to overly-easy conclusions: Matthew was a Jew, not a Gentile. He was a Jew who believed that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah. Wouldn't it seem strange that this line appears in a

gospel written by a Jew? In fact, it appears in Matthew's gospel alone. You might at least expect the line to appear in Luke's gospel, since Luke is a Gentile convert.

No, it is precisely because Matthew is so thoroughly Jewish that this line appears in his gospel. For he, more than any other gospel writer, knows the Passover story. And perhaps he, more than the rest, knows how Jesus is entering the story to radicalize it.

In the wake of Christ's crucifixion, Matthew is trying to show his fellow Jews that they have nothing to fear from God even if they rejected Jesus or even had him crucified. For, while any other group of people would read this line as a curse – "His blood be on us and on our children" – anyone familiar with the Passover story would realize that, by inserting himself as the Passover Lamb, Jesus has changed the curse into a blessing. The blood of the Passover lamb was the ancient sign of God's protection from judgment. "His blood be upon us and on our children!" Who in their right mind would not want the Lamb's blood upon them and their descendants?

If you think I'm just making this up because we're now on the Tri-Faith Commons and have to clean up the Christian story to make it more acceptable to our faith partners, I set before you the Book of Revelation to vouch for me. As we have seen before, Revelation envisions all people who have ever been born standing before God's throne joyfully worshiping God together. And what are they waving there? Palm branches! And what are they wearing there? White garments. What has made these garments white? They've all been washed in the blood of the Lamb.

Oh, and what is the purpose of all these people wearing white garments?

Revelation 19 tells us they are wedding garments.

In other words, not only does God love us – each and every one of us – but it is our destiny both to dwell in God's love and forgiveness and, incredibly, to be God's very Beloved. Even those who once crucified Jesus.