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The Humiliation of God

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Psalm 31:9-16; Isaiah 50:4-9a, Luke 19:28-40, 22:39-42, 45-54a

Christianity has at its core two stunning claims: *incarnation* and *crucifixion*.

We might have said incarnation and *resurrection* – Christmas and Easter, which is what the general culture thinks are the two centers of our faith. After all, almost anyone can sing at least one Christmas Carol, even if they're not Christian. And most people know about the Easter Bunny and may even assume that little rabbit appears somewhere in the biblical story – when it's actually a leftover artifact of ancient pagan fertility rites.

It's not *Christmas* and *Easter* – those happy American milestones of winter and spring – that define our faith. It's *Christmas* and *Crucifixion: incarnation and death on a cross*. The truly astonishing assertion we make in church is that the One who is Lord of the universe, Love-in-the-flesh, the Potentate of Time – to quote an old hymn – the Author of Life, the *Giver of every good and perfect gift*, is put to death.

The week that begins long ago in Jerusalem on a glorious day of palms and hosannas ends in ignominious defeat, with crowds cursing Jesus. It's an extraordinary paradox, unique to our faith. Call it *the humiliation of God*. The long-held messianic prophecy comes to a sudden and decisive end. The termination of hope. The cross on Golgotha stops it all.

The Hebrew poet issues a warning that sounds strangely like what Jesus might have felt during that week we call *holy*:

“I am the scorn of all my adversaries, a horror to my neighbors, an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me. I have passed out of mind like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel. For I hear the whispering of many — terror all around! — as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life.”
(Psalm 31:11-13)

The prophet Isaiah echoes the psalmist, again prefiguring what Jesus might have felt during that week:

“The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious; I did not turn backward. I gave my back to those who struck me and my cheeks to those who

pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting...Therefore I have set my face like flint." (Isaiah 50:5-6, 7b)

This was not the plan, that the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One, the Savior of the world, would be publicly dishonored and hung up to die like a common criminal. The humiliation of God. What kind of religion would imagine such a thing, *let alone embrace it as essential?*

I grew up in a post-World War II America when Christianity was booming, and Protestants were on top of the world. It was the heyday of what we called the Christian Century – which meant the historic European Protestant churches thought they were the dominant religious force on the planet.

Christianity as I experienced it back then was not about failure. My dad started a church in Wichita, Kansas, in 1955 and in two years there were more than 700 members.

We moved from Kansas to suburban Chicago to another large congregation full of success. Each spring in Holy Week we would go straight from palms to praise: Jesus enters Jerusalem hailed as a king, and then rises in victory from the grave. It made me so proud. The cross was always empty. From my privileged vantage point that seemed to be about right.

But the bubble of white American Christianity began to deflate. The struggles of the 1960s soon went to work on our understanding of what God was up to in Jesus. The once comfortable theological framework began to shift, and we began to confront painful truths. That good work continues today.

Our high school youth group once spent a weekend in a Roman Catholic monastery, which you've heard me talk about before because it was so formative for my faith. This was just after Vatican II when Catholics and Protestants were starting to discover each other, however tentatively. I'm sure our presence in a Catholic monastery that weekend in 1968 caused a stir – maybe some concern – among some Presbyterian parents; but the Benedictine monks welcomed us warmly.

In the small room where I stayed, the only thing hanging on the bare walls was a tiny crucifix positioned right above my pillow. In my Protestant cocoon I had never seen one up close before. There it was, watching over me as I slept each night. A little cross, with a little Jesus suspended on it.

That weekend in the monastery was my introduction to the rest of the Palm Sunday story. It thickened my faith,

made it more real. It helped me face the death by suicide of a high school friend. It helped me cope with a youth group member who slipped off a cliff on a hike and fell to his death.

It pushed me to see *compassion for the suffering of others* as the reason Jesus came into the world and the mission of those who follow him. The crucifix introduced me to the wideness of God's mercy, about which I had sung but only now began to grasp.

Our faith needs the cross and what it represents. Palms on this Sunday, yes, but not without the *passion*, the suffering, the pain, the dying.

People who lost loved ones to the storms this past week understand in a terrible new way the reality of suffering and sorrow. A tornado may strike *on any day of the week*, but it is *always Good Friday* when it happens. One moment

enjoying a concert in a theater, the next destruction raining down. One moment sitting at home with the kids, the next wondering where a child is as wind rips apart the house.

Death can be so random, so unexpected – as it was for those parents who sent their children off to school in Nashville on Monday only to learn in a horrible moment that they were victims of another school shooting.

So far in 2023, a school shooting has happened more than once every week in America. Gun violence is now the leading cause of death for children and youth in this country, according to the CDC, and it disproportionately affects children of color. “Black children are nearly 13 times more likely to be killed in a gun homicide than white children.”

(<https://giffords.org/lawcenter/memo/gun-violence-in-black-communities/>)

It doesn't have to be like this, but it will happen again and again and again until elected leaders – supported by community volunteers and houses of worship and parents and grandparents and survivors *and voters* – finally find the courage to take common sense action to reduce gun violence, changes wanted by most people, including gun owners.

Meanwhile, parents like those in Nashville this week will continue to go from the palms to the foot of the cross in one heart-rending, devastating instant that will last a lifetime.

“Be gracious to me, O God,” the psalmist says in a lament,

“For I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also. For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away.”

When Jesus goes to the cross, he does so to go into that classroom to be with the kids when violence erupts. When Jesus goes to the cross, he does so to enter that house about to be demolished by a storm. When Jesus goes to the cross, he does so to be with someone whose mental illness has become too much to bear. When Jesus goes to the cross, he does so to be with the Black teenager, gunned down on the street near his home. When Jesus goes to the cross, he does so to stand with a trans kid so bullied they want to end it all.

Palms, yes. Resurrection, yes. But not without the cross. Our faith, at its most honest and authentic, takes us up Golgotha, because that's where Jesus goes. And at the cross we face the impact of death.

In the beginning was the Word and the Word became flesh, but the Word was lynched. *Incarnation and crucifixion. The humiliation of God.* What kind of God would

let that happen? And what does it say to those of us who follow that God?

This is not a God of easy victory or cheap grace. Jesus has his life taken from him by the same fear and violence that still lurk in the world today.

He became shame that we might see the power in it. He became weak that we might find strength in our own weakness and brokenness. He suffered that our suffering – whatever its source – would be transformative as was his. He entered the gloom of night because we, too, go into those places light seems to have abandoned. And where hope has gone missing, *that's where the light of God's love begins to dawn.*

But the followers of Jesus did not know that part. There was incarnation and there was crucifixion. That's why they have such trouble recognizing resurrection when it

comes – and maybe the same is true for us. They can't get past the humiliation of the one they call Messiah.

The Palm Sunday Jesus is not a success by any stretch of the imagination, at least not yet. This God fails. Our faith is too often aimed at success by worldly standards. But God does not put on flesh to come out on top – and we don't take on Christian faith to win in the ways of the world.

As this Holy Week opens, our religious cousins, Jews and Muslims, the other children of Abraham, are marking their sacred seasons, as well. Each tradition is retelling the narrative at the heart of who they are as believers. These seven days of ours we have that chance – I would even say we have *the responsibility* – to reclaim and retell the narrative at the core of our faith: *incarnation and crucifixion*.

The crosses we will see in a moment, as they come forward in the final hymn, will remind us that incarnation leads to suffering and death. God is humiliated. Our faith is humbled by the cross, and we should be, too – and then, in our time of sorrow or in our place of pain, *we will find that we are not alone.*

That is the message of the meal set before us: that Jesus was taken, and broken, his life poured out, that we might know a light that will not be extinguished, a love that will never end and will not be stopped by anything, in this life or the life to come.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.