

Palm/Passion Sunday
April 5, 2020
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Matthew 21:1-11
Isaiah 50:4-9a
Psalm 31:9-16
Philippians 2:5-11
John 18:1—19:42

Church closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: livestream available on Facebook and YouTube.

This is a weird Palm Sunday.

Palm Sunday's always a bit weird, but usually it's a wacky weird: an odd parade of people from outside awkwardly waving palm branches as we process into church; the chaotic reading of the Passion Gospel, with lots of part parceled out – the unevenness on the part of the readers, and the occasional silence when someone forgets to read a line.

But the weirdness of this Palm Sunday is that it's NOT wacky. It's quiet. Too quiet. Everyone's staying at home.

Looking for diversions while staying at home, some of you are watching old movies.

This Sunday I am reminded of a movie from back in 2002 called "Hero."



To be clear, I'm not endorsing the film *per se*; it's not everyone's cup of tea. The film, starring Jet Li, is described as a "visually arresting martial arts epic" (with more than a little "magical realism" thrown in).

I'm not endorsing the film, but there is one scene in it that fits Holy Week. I described that scene for some of you on Good Friday a few years back. And the scene I'm thinking of features the two protagonists: a woman named Flying Snow and a man named Broken Sword.

They are warriors and they are lovers ... but mostly they are warriors. Flying Snow and Broken Sword are, both of them, masters of the sword, the most feared fighters in the land. Together, they have stood up to – and decimated – whole armies. And together, they have joined themselves to defeat their enemies, especially the king of Qin.

But near the end of the movie, Broken Sword has a change of heart. He refuses to continue as before, and Flying Snow is livid. She challenges him to explain himself, to explain his betrayal of what she took to be their common cause. And he tries ... he tries to explain to her how it has become his overriding desire to end the warfare that ravages their land ... he tries to justify, as he puts it, “what’s in his heart.”

Unconvinced, Flying Snow asks, “Is that all there is in your heart?”

“There is also you,” he replies.

And when she seems unimpressed, he pleads with her: “How can I convince you?”

Without hesitating, she reaches behind her and pulls out two swords and tosses one of the two swords to him as she unsheathes the other, and then she demands that he draw his sword.

“Is the sword the only answer?” he asks.

To which she insists, “I just want you to draw your sword.”

Her insistence that he fight her is a thing that clearly pains him, but after several agonizing moments, Broken Sword reluctantly unsheathes his sword and the two lovers become fighters. She lunges at him and he seems unready until, at the last moment, he adopts a defensive position and fends off her attack. And from then on, they thrust and block, swing and swirl.

They are evenly-matched with the sword. It seems that their battle may end in a stand-off as they step back and take stock of one another. Then she, the aggressor, lunges once more at him with her sword. And he, as before, adopts a defensive position. But this last time, at the absolute last moment, Broken Arrow drops his sword and leaves himself undefended. Flying Snow has no time to pull back. She runs him through.

And in that moment, her anger turns first to shock and then to dismay and finally to regret and, in the end, only sorrow.

“Why did you not defend yourself?” she asks, as he collapses to the ground.

“So you would finally believe me” is the only answer he can offer before he dies.

For me at least, that moment echoes what happens between all of humanity and our God on the cross. Throughout the whole of his ministry, Jesus told us what was in God's heart; Jesus told us of God's love, of God's unremitting love for all of us. And the profession of God's love in Jesus was met with such disbelief that we put that love to the ultimate test.

"Why does Jesus die on the cross?" we might ask.

"So we would finally believe him" may be the only answer we are offered.

All throughout his ministry, Jesus preached (in the words he spoke and the acts he performed) of God's love. In the hours before his death, his love for us became his preoccupying concern.

But some betray him and some arrest him. Some scourge him and others deny him. Some nail him to a tree and others watch helplessly as their teacher dies.

And when Jesus finally utters his final words on the cross, three words sum up everything. "It is finished," he says, before breathing his last breath, which I take to mean that there is now really nothing more he can do to make known to us what is in the heart of God, nothing more he can do than what he has already done.

The cross is how we know that everything Jesus was telling us is true, that even if it means dying this horrific death on the cross, he won't call down the legions of angels.

"Why does Jesus die on the cross?"

"So we would finally believe him."

In the end, if the only way we'll believe that God loves us completely and unreservedly, if the only way we'll believe that God loves us so unflinchingly, is for Jesus to leave us free to do our worst ... so be it.

And so he dies on a cross to show us what is in the heart of God. In the hope that we might finally come to see that God loves us so and will never retaliate – and in the hope that we who have been so well-loved might be moved to do our best – Jesus loves us to the end. That's the power of Jesus, the peace-maker, of Jesus, the cross-bearer, of Jesus, the love-bearer.

I close with an apt prayer from our Prayer Book service of Morning Prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your Name. Amen. (*Book of Common Prayer*, p. 101)