

## But...

*Luke 22:14-62; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11*

CWZepp, BWCOB, March 20, 2016

Palm / Passion Sunday.

It is probably the most confusing Sunday in the Christian liturgical year – an almost two-faced approach to worship that occurs annually on the Sunday before Easter. On one hand, it is practically “Easter Celebration, Part 1.” The mood is festive as our children wave their palm branches and help us recreate the festival atmosphere of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Our choirs and musical ensembles prepare special pieces that almost always involve the word “Hosanna!” And here at BWCOB, it is even our tradition to hold our children’s Easter Egg hunt after worship on this Sunday.

But “Palm Sunday” is also “Passion Sunday” – the Sunday that leads us into Holy Week. It is the Sunday that we contemplate what it really means when Jesus is welcomed into Jerusalem, when we remember how those shouts of “Hosanna!” so quickly turned into cries of “Crucify him!” It is the Sunday when the lectionary asks us to read the Passion Narrative – which if fully practiced, today would have amounted to nearly two full chapters from Luke’s gospel. In a tradition that has generally not emphasized observance of Good Friday, it is perhaps the best time we have to meditate not only on the life of Jesus, but on his death as well.

How we navigate and understand these diverging meanings and traditions says a lot about our faith. And as I have thought about that task, I’ve kept coming back to a single tiny word that features prominently in three of today’s four lectionary texts for Passion Sunday...

“But.”

On its own, this word means absolutely nothing. In context, however, it is commentary. It is meaning. It *is* faith. Let me explain...

The importance of this single word is perhaps most noticeable and apparent in the Psalm. In verses 9-13 of Psalm 31, the Psalmist holds nothing back in naming the gloom in which he exists. In just five verses, we hear of his distress, his wasting away from grief, his sorrow and sighing, his failing strength, and his misery as his bones waste away. He names that he is the scorn of adversaries, a horror to neighbors, and an object of dread to acquaintances. He confesses that people flee from him in the street, that he is a broken vessel like one who is dead, that there is terror all around him as many whisper and scheme and plot to take his life.

Then comes that magical word in verse 14 – “But...I trust in you...you are my God...my times are in your hand.”<sup>1</sup> As commentator Kimberly Clayton puts it, “By means of the small word ‘but,’ the great ‘nevertheless’ of faith, the psalmist gives testimony *against all evidence to the contrary*. ‘But I trust in you, O Lord...’ It is a determined statement of faith – perhaps even a defiant statement of faith, in the face of suffering and sorrow and death.”<sup>2</sup> Perhaps more than anything else in the text, this single word illustrates the nature of real faith – what it means to be a human being fully trusting in God.

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 31:14-15, *NRSV*

<sup>2</sup> Kimberly L. Clayton. Pastoral Perspective on Psalm 31:9-16. *Feasting on the Word*. Year C, Vol. 2. p. 168. Emphasis mine.

The text from Philippians similarly hinges on the word “but”, telling us that Jesus was in the form of God and equal with God, *but* emptied himself and took human form, humbled himself even as a slave, and became obedient all the way to his death on a cross. As one of the earliest hymns and statements of belief in the Christian faith, these words communicate the essence of the incarnation – Jesus was in the form of God and equal with God. As such, anything and everything was possible for him. He could have avoided the events of Holy Week. He could have taken a pass on the cross. But – there it is again – he didn’t. Jesus instead chose downward mobility and full humanity – and all that comes with it, even – and perhaps especially – death.

We see this decision born out repeatedly in the gospel passion narrative. At his last supper with his disciples, as he is sharing the cup with them, Jesus says “This is the cup of the new covenant, *but* even here at this table is the one who is betraying me.”<sup>3</sup> When a dispute arises among the disciples about who is the greatest, Jesus tells them that the kings of the Gentiles Lord is over them, *but* it wasn’t to be so among them, for he was among them as a servant.<sup>4</sup> On the Mount of Olives, he prayed that the cup of suffering would be removed from him, *but* not his will be done, but God’s.<sup>5</sup> Shortly thereafter, one of his disciples tries to resist those who came to arrest Jesus and strikes off an ear with his sword, *but* Jesus says, “No more of this!” and healed him.<sup>6</sup> All told, the word “but” occurs 15 times just in the portion of Luke’s gospel that Joyce read for us today.

“Well, that is all very interesting and everything,” you may say, “but...why does it matter? What difference does it make to my life and faith how many times a word is used in the gospel?” That answer is easy – absolutely none. What does matter, and what may make a difference, is that we find ways to practice and to embody the meaning of that little word – “but” – for in that word is the essence of faith.

I recently read an article that I think illustrates well my meaning. It was written for the “Sunday Review” in *The New York Times* last month by Kate Bowler, a historian of the American prosperity gospel who recently received a diagnosis of stage 4 cancer. She writes that one of her first thoughts upon hearing the diagnosis was, “*O God, this is ironic.*” For she had just written a book called *Blessed*. And it is precisely at the word “but” that we see just how ironic her life had become. Hear part of her story in her own words:

CANCER has kicked down the walls of my life. I cannot be certain I will walk my son to his elementary school someday or subject his love interests to cheerful scrutiny. I struggle to buy books for academic projects I fear I can’t finish for a perfect job I may be unable to keep. I have surrendered my favorite manifestoes about having it all, managing work-life balance, and maximizing my potential. I cannot help but remind my best friend that if my husband remarries everyone will need to simmer down on talking about how special I was in front of her. (And then I go on and on about how this is an impossible task given my many delightful qualities. Let’s list them. ...) Cancer requires that I stumble around in the debris of dreams I thought I was entitled to and plans I didn’t realize I had made.

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 22:20-21

<sup>4</sup> Luke 22:24-27

<sup>5</sup> Luke 22:39-42

<sup>6</sup> Luke 22:50-51

But cancer has also ushered in new ways of being alive. Even when I am this distant from Canadian family and friends, everything feels as if it is painted in bright colors. In my vulnerability, I am seeing my world without the Instagrammed filter of breezy certainties and perfectible moments. I can't help noticing the brittleness of the walls that keep most people fed, sheltered and whole. I find myself returning to the same thoughts again and again: *Life is so beautiful. Life is so hard.*<sup>7</sup>

If we are paying attention, the word “but” in the passion narrative, just as it is in Kate’s story, is a gospel opportunity – a chance for good news to reframe and reinvigorate the valleys and ironies of our lives. It provides us the chance to reframe our experiences, our expectations, and our faith. It is, as commentator Julian DeShazier writes, “an opportunity to resist that easy move from Palm Sunday to Easter – to resist being, as Gardner Taylor often said, ‘a resurrection people but not a crucifixion people.’ It presses us to sit with the fact of Jesus’ suffering.”<sup>8</sup>

Jesus rides into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to a hero’s welcome. But...he doesn’t stop there. He keeps going. He keeps riding, all the way into the depths of our being, into the violence and despair and betrayal and loneliness of our lives. He keeps riding all the way to death – that final destination that hangs over all of us and all that we love.

But...we know that isn’t the end of the story. And every time we claim the cross we participate in that “great nevertheless” of faith.

And that is good news indeed!

## **Benediction**

God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish,  
*but* have everlasting life.

May it be so for us all...

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<sup>7</sup> Kate Bowler. “Death, the Prosperity Gospel, and Me.” *The New York Times*. February 13, 2016. Available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/14/opinion/sunday/death-the-prosperity-gospel-and-me.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur&r=1>

<sup>8</sup> Julian DeShazier. “Reflections on the Lectionary.” *Christian Century*. March 16, 2016. p. 21.