

**4th April 2004 Palm Sunday: Rev Kerri Mesner
Theme: Passion**

Greetings friends, and Happy Palm Sunday!

In keeping with Pressley's recent tradition of offering sermon notes by email, here is my (rough) version of the sermon I gave today. While it's not verbatim, hopefully it gives a good idea of what we talked about today.

I invite you to continue the conversations raised by this sermon today... I enjoyed talking with many of you about it at church today, and hope we can talk more!

Peace, Kerri

I want to talk with you today about passion. About Jesus' passion. About the Passion story itself. About passion for God. and about passion in ourselves.

In our reading today we find ourselves with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. And you know after my studying and reading and thinking and preparing for this sermon. I've come to a thought about this particular point in the Passion narrative.

I think it scares us.

I think we are scared of this point in the Biblical story. and maybe with good reason.

We use the Revised Standard Version. But sometimes looking at other translations can give us some additional clues. The Revised English Bible says that "horror and anguish overwhelmed him, and he said to them, 'my heart is ready to break with grief.'" and the New Jerusalem Bible tells us that he began to feel terror and anguish. And our reading today tells us that he threw himself to the ground in his grief.

This is not a mild, passive, long-suffering man that I'm reading about here. I see a man in anguish and absolutely struggling in that moment to somehow stay present with what he feels and with what he knows of his God. And to me, this is an intensely emotional, intensely embodied. intensely passionate man. Sometimes I think we try to kind of wash over Jesus' strong emotions. You know the whole idea that Christians don't get angry is a good example. I think Jesus got plenty angry plenty of times! And I think that here, in the garden, he is perhaps quite angry with his God. That anger, that despair, that anguish. are all a part of his passion.

This is not to underestimate his faith. Just a few chapters earlier, in Mark 11:22-4, he reminds his disciples, "have faith in God. Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, be taken up and thrown into the sea, and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." This is not a man of passive faith, either.

I was reading one commentary about this passage, and he reminded us of this earlier passage. He acknowledged Jesus' struggle, but said that it did not lessen Jesus' acceptance of God's will for him. I wonder about that. Jesus throws himself on the ground in anguish. In agony. Is it possible that he doesn't accept what is about to happen? Is it possible that he is fighting it with every bit of his being?

If Jesus doesn't want to accept his pending death, I think this challenges us- and maybe scares us- for a couple of reasons.

First, maybe it calls into question our ideas about the meaning of his death. I've talked some with you before about the questions I have about this. AS some of you know, I really struggle with the idea of atonement theology. And hear me. I respect and honor that this is an important theological tradition for many of our community. But for me. I struggle with the idea of a God planning for and calling for the death of a beloved child. And while I know it's strong language. and challenges some of our longest-held beliefs, I have to say that I resonate with Rita Nakashima Brock's belief that atonement theology is in effect, child abuse. That to say that God sanctioned this suffering and death of God's own child is the equivalent of child abuse. And for me, that's not the God I've come to know and believe in. As a woman, as someone who has experienced abuse, it just doesn't fit. I need to find another way to make sense of Jesus' suffering and death.

And I think if Jesus is unwilling to accept his pending death, it also takes us to the heart of the struggle - then- and now- to make sense of it- to find an answer to that "why" is at the heart of much of this discussion. It can't be okay that Jesus simply died. we need to find a way to make sense of this tragedy. And if Jesus himself is throwing himself on the ground in that garden and shouting Why God!? Where does that leave us? How do we make sense of it?

I don't know if we've found an answer to that question yet. That WHY. I think we've tried. for more than two thousand years. we've looked everywhere from theology to politics. and I don't know that we've found an answer yet. And I think this is part of what is so very very difficult about this garden moment. is the WHY that is implicit in it. and our inability to answer that why.

And I do. I think that Jesus in the garden scares us. What if this Jesus is deeply angry, enraged over what is happening to him? What if this Jesus is angry at God because of what is happening? What if this Jesus is asking, shouting, WHY?

What does this do to our understanding of Jesus, of the garden, of the passion?

More personally, if we really look at Jesus in that garden, and really listen to our own hearts, our own souls, what do we feel?

It reminds me a bit of the Mel Gibson movie, "The Passion" that's out right now. There has been a lot of discussion about this movie in our community and on our email lists. I haven't decided yet whether to go see it- I have mixed feelings about it. but that's another sermon!

At any rate, that reminds me of a time, about twenty years ago I saw a production of Godspell in a local Catholic church in Victoria, Canada. It was put on by a young group of performers in the church. I don't know if it was a great production or not. but to this day I still vividly remember the scene with Jesus on the cross, where he sings "Oh God I'm dying". and it made me weep.

If we were to really look at Jesus in the garden, would we weep?

Because there is deep learning in this garden. I really believe this. I think this passionate, angry, despairing, deeply faithful man has so much to teach us for our lives today. I would suggest that it is the very depth of Jesus heart and soul and anger and despair and joy and faith that gave Jesus the depth of PASSION that lives on in us today.

If we were to really open our hearts in our own gardens now, what would we feel?

I think we are each at different places in our journeys and our abilities to do this. And I do see it very much as a journey. a lifelong journey to open our hearts and our minds and our spirits and our bodies more and more fully to ALL that there is in our lives to feel and know.

As a community of transgender, bisexual, lesbian, gay, two-spirited, straight, queer, other-named peoples.. We know deep joy and we know deep pain. Many of us know what it means to be cut off. To feel as utterly alone as Jesus did in that garden. That's a whole other piece of this story, isn't it. How it must have felt for Jesus to have tried three times to get his disciples to "get it". and their inability to do so. How alone he must have felt that night.

Many of us know that kind of isolation. Many of our people are still out there struggling with that kind of isolation.

Many in our community struggle with other kinds of isolation as well. I think that those of us that live with mental health issues have a lot in common with Jesus in this garden. We know what it means to feel a wide range of deep, wonderful, and terrible feelings. We know what it means to feel despair and utter aloneness. And we know the joy of deep faith that comes from walking through those moments to the other side. I know that for me. and in many of the stories I have heard and read by other people who live with mental health issues, that oftentimes those journeys end up forming some of the deepest cornerstones of our faith in God.

Rita Nakashima Brock describes passion as including tragedy and pain. especially if we are really experiencing it with our full bodies and selves. but she also describes the discovery of passion as resurrection.

That moves me powerfully. That our discover of our passion- is our resurrection.

When we talk about a full life in Christ, a full life in God and in Spirit, what are we talking about? Is it possible that this is part of what Jesus has to teach us in this garden? . That if we are willing to walk through the garden, through the heart and soul and body work of our deepest feelings . that we will come through to the other side to something new. To a passion that is unlike anything we have ever known. To an aliveness that is unlike anything we have ever known.

And hear me. I'm not talking about psychological healing alone here. although I think that in itself is a powerful testimony to the power of human spirit and God's love at work. I'm talking about something more too. I'm talking about how our lives change when we are feeling fully living fully in every bit of our beings! We've been talking about this in a lot of different ways over the past several weeks, haven't we. The ways that we find to live out God's love in our lives as fully as we can.

And I guess what I'm suggesting today is that if we have the courage to do what Jesus did. to really sit in the garden, to throw ourselves on the ground if necessary, and to feel EVERYTHING that we are feeling at those times, that we can come through to a deeply passionate experience of ourselves, our lives, and our God. that can truly resurrect us. And that we are then in a place to do amazing things. in our own lives. in the lives of those around us. in this community right here!

Oriah Mountain Dreamer puts it another way. she talks about being "God-mad".

She is talking about how our lives would change if we truly allowed ourselves to live from that place of being absolutely mad for God. She asks us how we would live our lives if everything we did came from that place of absolute love of God. Even if it meant appearing crazy to those around us.

Now I know that the phrase God-mad itself carries some problems in terms of how we associate "madness" with craziness, with mental illness, and so on.

But you know, I wonder sometimes if those of us with mental health issues have something to teach here. I'm not talking about glorifying the struggle of mental illness. But sometimes, I think that some of us living with mental health issues somehow find ourselves on a particularly spiritual path. Maybe it is because those times in the garden can be times of such deep anguish and that by facing and living through that anguish we may find ourselves having an intensely deep faith.. Maybe it is because, as some writers suggest, that some folks with mental health differences are in a different place with their creativity and their spirituality. what I would think of as one of those liminal places. those places where we are able to see across boundaries just a little more clearly.

At any rate, wherever we are in our journeys. what would it be like if we allowed ourselves to be truly, completely, God-mad? What would it be like to be truly completely passionately IN our lives, our bodies, our relationships, our experience of God and the Divine? What would it be like?

And how would our world change?

Jesus in the garden. Jesus' passion. what is the call to us as we enter into this holy week?

If you need to spend some time in the garden, whatever that place looks like for you right now, I invite you to be there with presence. If you already find yourself in a garden, I invite you to become present as you can in that place. and I invite you, like Jesus, to know with absolute certainty that you are not in the garden alone. God is there with you.. I believe God is weeping with you when you weep. holding you in the despair, and listening to your anger.

And as we move into this Holiest of weeks. I invite you to enter more deeply into your passion. Wherever you are in that journey. Feeling the whole range of who you are and who God created you to be. Experiencing your passion as fully and completely as you can. letting yourself be truly passionate for God. and seeing how that changes you. and changes the world around you.

- **What if we were to make this a passionate Easter!**
- **What if we were to truly move into the new life that is this season. Not just in our heads, but in our hearts and minds and bodies and spirits?**
- **What if we were to really come alive this Easter. and what if we were to share that life with each and every being around us.**
- **What if?**

Are you willing to take a risk on passion this Easter? Amen.