

INSIDE/OUT (GOSPEL OF LUKE) – Luke Knight

Running Toward Danger | John 17: 18-21 | April 3, 2022 – Palm Sunday

"As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified. My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me."
John 17: 18-21 (NIV)

That's Jesus' prayer during the meal he shares with his disciples the night before his death. His disciples had shared more meals with Jesus than they could remember, but this one was different, and not just because it was Passover. He'd washed everyone's feet (strangely, right in the middle of dinner) which took a good deal of time and was actually rather awkward, another of Jesus' moves which baffles yet inspires the group. The meal ends with Jesus praying for his disciples, but prayer would spill over as they leave the room and head across the valley to an olive grove. Everyone's tired after the long meal, but Jesus insists, he wants to pray some more. He seems heavy, but also intent, determined. Late as it is they all get up, and Jesus leads the way. What happens next in that olive grove is dangerous. A dangerous prayer, a dangerous choice, a dangerous future for Jesus and his friends.

We've heard stories in recent weeks of people who have chosen to go to Ukraine, or to stay in Ukraine to help. Stories of people offering their lives, not out of delusional heroism, but genuine love; stories of carers of disabled or sick children not abandoning their posts but sheltering in basements with little ones; stories of journalists committed to bearing witness to the atrocities on the ground; stories of NGO workers promising themselves to the preservation of human life, refusing to accept that life is cheap or expendable. These are stories of taking human life seriously. When we hear them we're amazed and moved. The worst in us somehow brings out the best in us; the resolve to be dangerously generous in the face of terrible devastation.

Today is Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week. On Holy Week, we think about Jesus' entry to Jerusalem, not on a tank but a donkey. We think about the Last Supper, where Jesus doesn't sit back, letting someone else do the dishes, but gets on his knees and washes his disciples' feet. We think about the Garden of Gethsemane, that olive grove where Jesus prays to avoid the cup of suffering, but eventually chooses to drink it so his friends would be spared. We think about the arrest, the trial, and the injustice. The high point of Holy Week is Good Friday, the most gruesome and destructive event in human history; yet also somehow the most moving and creative event in history. Jesus didn't shy away from Holy Week; that's what we see when we look up at his naked and disfigured body, exposed to the elements hanging on the scaffolding outside Jerusalem's walls. And next Sunday, Easter Sunday, we'll celebrate the surprising reality of Jesus' resurrection; the event which tells us that God's life can take everything death has to throw at it. That's Holy Week, a week unlike any other.

There are Holy Weeks we've probably not taken all that seriously in the past. A day or two off, a chocolate bunny, a few lilies, and some happy songs. But a pandemic has taught us to treasure the essentials of Holy Week – the death and resurrection of Jesus – which moves us to treasure each other. Do we need togetherness when division is rampant? Yes. Do we need forgiveness when we harm or fail each other? Yes. Do we need the hope of a good future on a planet that feels increasingly precarious? Yes. Taking Holy Week seriously is a good thing, because in Holy Week we remember

that God took seriously the need and desperation of the entire world. So seriously that he gives his very life to meet creation's seemingly bottomless need. Holy Week is shocking and surprising in scripture because it tells us the history of God refusing to shy away from sacrifice, so much so that we cost him everything.

When disaster strikes and everyone scatters in fear, as we've seen recently in places like Ethiopia or Ukraine, you may have heard that encouragement to keep an eye out for those few running toward the danger. No matter how bad it gets there's always someone running toward the danger, rather than away, to help and heal. Holy Week holds the history of Jesus running into danger and destruction and death and bringing us through into life. It was something Jesus did once and for all. But because of that special week, that special human life in Jesus, something else happened. Because Jesus ran into the danger, his followers are now also unleashed do their own running on his behalf. What do I mean? I mean that because of that Holy Week, every week is now holy. Because of Jesus' special, holy life, your life and my life have been made holy, as we heard Jesus pray in John's gospel: "As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified. My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message..."

So, because of Jesus' actions on Holy Week, we his followers now, needn't live destructively, but constructively; we needn't live cynically but creatively; we needn't live in scarcity, but sacrificially; we can live from love, not fear. We can run toward danger and desperation with the gospel of peace because we go where Jesus' goes. And even though evil and death are still destructive and harrowing today, Christians believe that evil and death are fighting not just a losing battle, but a lost battle. So Christians can run toward danger with the confidence that love drives out fear, light evicts darkness, life overcomes death.

Running toward danger. That sounds a bit reckless doesn't it? Shouldn't we keep in mind that we're not Jesus, even that at times Jesus told his friends that they couldn't go where he was going? Well, yes, but we're not talking about delusional heroism, or a messiah complex. We're not saying that we can do what Jesus did back then, just that we can do what Jesus has for us now, because of what he did back then. Scripture says that Christians have both the spirit of Jesus in them, and the example of Jesus to follow. In other words, they've got the power for and the template from which to live. They have everything they need to live like Jesus, through the capacity of the Holy Spirit, the same spirit that raised Jesus from the dead. Still, running toward danger? What about boundaries? What about self-care? What about all self-protective rhythms we're learning of in our convenient modern bubble? Running toward danger doesn't sound like a good idea if we're after self-preservation or that very popular word today, "balance". Yet, Christians are told to run anyway. Take up your cross and follow me. Love one another as I have loved you. Inasmuch as you have done to the least of these you have done to me. I am sending you, just as my Father has sent me.

Where is Jesus sending us? He sends us toward the dangerous reality of humble love in the flesh. Running toward danger is running toward one another, rather than turning away. We're not running into danger for danger's sake, but for one another's sake. We're running toward each other because we see God in each other and believe God is seen through us. We go where Jesus goes, and Jesus is always going to you and to me. So, running toward danger looks like forgiving someone when you know you'll never be able to forget. Running toward danger is serving and helping without getting credit or being ignored or misunderstood. Running toward danger is listening to and working with others and their inconvenient opinions when it's far easier to cut them out or off. Running toward danger is giving more than what's reasonable because you're compelled by unreasonable love to sacrifice for someone else. We don't run without an example, because Jesus has run ahead, setting the pace. We don't run unequipped, because Jesus has fully outfitted us through his spirit for every good race.

That's what Holy Week is about. It's taking Jesus so seriously that, first, we let him run into the war-zones of our hearts, the gaping wounds of pain and disappointment, to heal and even resurrect what's dead or dying. Jesus didn't shy away from Holy Week and doesn't shy away from us now. With an eye on Good Friday this is a good week to let Jesus help us, forgive us, hold us, heal us. This is a good week to recognize that we need help, and Jesus is the first and primary responder to the desperate need every one of us carries. First, we let Jesus run to us. Like the father running to the wayward child coming home. Like the woman searching for her lost coin. Like the shepherd hunting down his lost sheep. At Holy Week we shout from under the rubble, "I'm over here, Jesus, please come help me!" and he does. If the cross says anything it's that you can always find God at ground zero, loving dangerously in the heart of the disaster zone.

And once Jesus has found us and fixed us up, knowing that's usually a slow and ongoing process, he tells us to look around at others who also need his help. Staggeringly, Jesus, the first responder, turns us into second responders. And we're meant to take his marching orders to heart, to love one another like he loves us; to speak words of life not death; to create not destroy. But be warned, if we choose to follow Jesus into loving dangerously it will cost us. It will cost us our time and attention and money, and definitely our pride and self-centredness. It will cost us our silence about things we shouldn't be silent about. It will cost us our chatter when it's best to keep quiet for another's sake. It will cost us our very lives, but in giving them up, Jesus said we'd find them. We'll shed our inhumanity and gain our humanity back in Jesus' wake of new creation. So we run toward the messy stuff, the impolite stuff, the swept under the carpet stuff. We don't shy away, because we follow the one who ran through the danger and came out the other side with you and me in his more than capable arms. Welcome to Holy Week. There goes Jesus, determined and dangerous to death itself. Into Jerusalem on a donkey. Into the upper room for one last supper. "This way", says Jesus, "follow me to the garden to pray. As my father has sent me, so am I sending you."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What has Holy Week (Palm Sunday – Easter Sunday) meant to you in the past?
2. What is the most meaningful part of Holy Week?
3. What makes Holy Week comforting? What makes it challenging?
4. What do you feel Jesus wants to say to you, or do in your heart, this Holy Week?