

Palms, Poop and the Passion  
Palm Sunday – March 20, 2016  
Caldwell Presbyterian Church  
Rev. John Cleghorn  
Luke 19:28-40

Yesterday, I had the great pleasure of officiating at the wedding of Nancy Pugh and Kurt Stubenhofer. God smiled in the form of sunshine as they joined their lives together.

Nancy and Kurt chose a poem to be read during the ceremony. It has a funny title but it rings deeply true. It is called “Falling in love is like owning a dog.” It reads in part:

“Love doesn’t like being left along for long.  
But come home and love is always happy to see you.  
It may break a few things accidentally in its passion for life.  
But you can never be mad at love for long.

“Is love good all the time? No! No!  
Love can be bad. Bad, love, bad! Very bad love.

Love makes messes.  
Love leaves you little surprises here and there.  
Love needs a lot of cleaning up after.  
Sometimes you just want to get love fixed.  
Sometimes you want to roll up a piece of newspaper  
And swat love on the nose,  
Not so much to cause pain,  
Just to let love know, *Don’t you ever do that again!*

Anyone who has ever owned a dog knows how true that it is. And that reminded me of a news story I read recently. It seems the employees of the parks and recreation department in Jefferson County, Colorado recently sent a crew out to spruce a local dog park, where the four-legged residents of Jefferson County loved to run free.

But they were doing something else as freely as they were running in that public park. When the landscaping crew arrived at the park, they found poop– and lots of it. So much poop left behind by negligent dog owners that the county decided it was time to make a point.

So they planted those orange marking flags – you know, the kind with the thin wire stem – everywhere they found a, well, let’s call it a deposit. Suddenly the dog park resembled a local art installation. Six hundred flags spread out across the park. Six hundred.

Then the county took one step further to remind the good canine-loving citizens of Jefferson County of their civic duty. They posted a big sign that declared “There is no poop fairy.” The sign went on to read:

Like the Loch Ness Monster or Bigfoot, the fabled poop fairy has been the stuff of legend. Flying undetected in parks, neighborhoods and schoolyards, she was said to follow close behind dogs and their owners – picking up what the dog left behind, before flying off to the next canine creation. A widespread belief that she existed seemed to reassure some that cleaning up after one’s dog was sort of ... optional.

Stay tuned for further reports on whether this made life in Jefferson County, Colorado, well, a little cleaner.

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What in the world does that story have to do with Palm Sunday?

Well, at risk of dumbing down theology way too much, the truth is that, like the dogs of Jefferson County, we all leave behind messes. As Nancy and Kurt’s wedding poem said, even love makes messes. We traipse through life just like dogs in a dog park. And, well, we don’t always leave things better than the way we find them. In fact, quite often, the opposite.

By now, I hope you’ve realized that I am not talking about poop. And I’m certainly not suggesting the Jesus is the poop fairy. I am talking about our fallen state, our brokenness as frail and imperfect creatures, our state of sin. Not individual sins that can be marked with little orange flags and cleaned up in a jiffy. But that part of each of us that is innate, no matter how well we may try to live our lives. We are broken. We fall short. We stand in need of God’s reconciling grace.

Frederick Buechner describes sin as a centrifugal force, a self-centered part of our very core that wants to push everything and everyone out from us. He writes:

“Original sin” means we all originate out of a sinful world which taints us from the word go. We all tend to make ourselves the center of the universe, pushing away centrifugally from that center everything that seems to impede its freewheeling. More even than hunger, poverty, or disease, it is what Jesus said he came to save the world from.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wishful Thinking, Buechner. P. 89

That is, at least in part, what we were to have been praying about over these last 40 days of Lent. Lent is about our taking a long, hard, unblinking look in the mirror, as preparations for the events of this week, Holy Week.

For us, it is a week like no other. Today, we waive our palms and shout Hosanna to great the savior king. But we know how the rest of the story goes this week, how it progresses from Christ's final confrontations with worldly power and corruption to his arrest, trial and crucifixion. It is called "the passion narrative" because passion means "to suffer," lest we sugar coat how the story goes, lest we gloss over who Christ suffered for.

If there is one question that lies at the heart of Holy Week, perhaps it is this: Why did it have to happen? Why did the story have to play out this way? If God is sovereign, wasn't there another way it could end?

That question points us to the subject of atonement, the question of what exactly was achieved on the cross. There may be no more pivotal question to any person of faith. A complete faith rests on the claim that we are sinful beings, that we stand in need of being reconciled to God, gathered back in just as the prodigal son's father gathered him back in. Atonement is how we talk about the ways the cross achieves that in-gathering, how we are, in the end, saved by grace.

And, unlike some doctrines, the church has never stood on only one theory of atonement. There are many theories. So it is left to each of us to sort out on our own. What better time than Holy Week for us to give this matter the thought it deserves, whether for the first time or the hundred and first?

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As with other somewhat complex ideas, it may help to have an image for each of the major ideas of atonement.

For example, picture a battlefield where God and the devil are in a fight to the end. At stake is our lives, our salvation, the salvation of the world itself. In the distance, we hear a choir sing Martin Luther's famous hymn, "A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing." In this theory, Christ, the "victor," achieves that victory on the cross.

Is that how it goes? Well, maybe. But is the prince of peace really one to strap on armor and open up a can of, well, you know what? And, don't we also know that this kind of black-and-white, dualistic, good-verses-evil thinking rarely explains all that is gray and hazy in our lives?

Then what about another image? This scene is of a prison camp. We are the prisoners, bound by the chains of our sin. Suddenly, a man steps up to present himself in a kind of prisoner exchange for all of us. Christ purchases our freedom on the cross. The ransom is his life for ours, a costly price at that.

We've heard this kind of imagery before, haven't we? But then, we might ask, to whom is this ransom paid? If it is God, what kind of Creator God would demand a ransom be paid for his own children? If it is the so-called devil, why would Christ deal with the devil in the first place?

A third and more prevalent image is that of a sacrifice. The scene is of a bloody altar, the kind where sacrifices were made, as with those we read about in the Old Testament. A priest comes forward to make a sacrifice. But his sacrifice is his own life. His blood flows. He himself is the lamb that is slain. The priest is Jesus.

Now, this is a hard image for us. We don't live in time or in a culture of animal sacrifice. It makes little sense to us. But, then again, Christ's end – his beating, his carrying the cross against his open wounds, his crucifixion, complete with a stabbing – was, after all, an awfully bloody affair.

So this metaphor has some things going for it. It also has real limitations. We know from reading the Old Testament that sacrifices were made over and over again. The children of Israel messed up and they made a sacrifice. It was a transaction, one that bought cheap and temporary divine relief. Is that how we are to think of what Christ did for us on the cross. And, as for God, what kind of God demands his own son be sacrificed? Didn't God stop Abraham from doing the same thing?

On to another image: The scene is now a courtroom. God is the judge, a fair and just arbiter sitting high above the courtroom on the bench. We who have broken the law, who break the law every day, are found guilty and receive the death sentence. Just then, one who has never sinned, never broken any law, steps forward to take our judgment upon himself. Justice is achieved. Order is restored and the sinful stand reconciled to God, free to go.

Perhaps this imagery of a courtroom is the most familiar to us. So we can get our head around this one. We read about courtroom trials in the media almost every day. Still, this image leaves us with real questions. As in, if we know Jesus is always there to take the rap for us, can't we just do whatever we want, live however sinfully we can, without repentance? Or, we might ask, can one person's guilt really be transferred to another? And, is it a fair God who punishes Christ for our sins?

So, we see that no one image or metaphor is sufficient alone. Each one has its drawbacks. As with the New Testament itself, we need several images and approaches

to answering the question of atonement ... who Christ was and what God in Christ achieved. Even then, we may be left with questions.

A final theory works in a different way. The battlefield, the prison, the courtroom – they all describe a change in our outward status, our position as the world around us sees us. We survive the battle. We are freed from prison. We walk out of the courtroom because someone else took our sentence.

But, none of these metaphors speak to a change within us, an inward undoing and rewiring. That begs an important question about this atonement business: Isn't there more to it than just a change in our status? Isn't Christ's trial, death and resurrection meant to lead to something, to inspire something, to change not just how the world sees us but how we see the world and our place in it? Christ's death was real and it came at the highest cost. Might we think about this as a compelling moral demonstration, a model for living that is to transform us thereafter, not one that looks at Jesus as just a nice guy who said and did good things and got killed ... but because the Christ was God's very being among us?

If we as the church are to be transformed into the body of Christ, the heart of Christ, the mind of Christ, the feet and hands of Christ, are these just spare parts? Can we imagine using those divine feet to walk right back into a fight? To use those divine hands to make one bloody sacrifice after another, to buy one day of God's forgiveness at a time and then do something that requires another sacrifice?

Are we to adopt the mind of Christ only to see the world the same old cynical and hopeless way? Are we to seek the heart of Christ only to hate our neighbor, to judge our brother, to resent our sister? Is that all that this is all about?

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At risk of frustrating you, I am not going to tell you the answer. I won't tell you which theory of atonement is right. It is incumbent on you to do that heavy lifting for yourself as a person of real faith.

In closing, then, let's return to the image we have in today's reading from Luke's gospel – Jesus riding a colt into Jerusalem, Jesus coming to us, just as the father of the wayward prodigal ran to him before the prodigal could even open his mouth to confess his sin.

Yes, we leave messes behind us wherever we go. We are sinful creatures. There is no fairy that comes along and cleans up after us. Our God in Christ is anything but that. Our God in Christ, the divine en-fleshment of love itself, came in human form and walked among us.

Today, we sing Hosanna. But, by the end of the week, we will have him on the cross and in the tomb. God forgive us when we treat this passion narrative like a fairy tale. God, walk with us, that we might walk every step of the way this week with Christ. Amen.