

Palm Sunday
Philippians 2:5-11

The writer Brian Doyle wrote this in 2016. He said, “By chance I was in New York City seven months after September 11, and I saw a moment that I still turn over and over in my mind like a puzzle, like a koan, like a prism.” This is his story of what happened that day:

I was footsore and yearning for beer and I stepped into a bar.

It was that russet hour between evening and night and the bar was populous but not crowded. Most of the people seemed to have stopped by for a beer after work. One table of men in the corner wore the faded coveralls of telephone linemen or public utility workers. Another table of mature women were in the bland dark uniforms of corporate staff. Interestingly, there was a young Marine in glittering full dress uniform at the bar, with two older men I took to be his father and uncle, perhaps; they were laughing and resting their hands affectionately on his shoulders and he was smiling and savoring their hands like they were pet birds he had not had on his shoulders for a long time.

I got a beer and sat in the corner and watched as the bartender...set a beer in front of the Marine and waved off the uncle’s offer to pay, and his little cheerful gesture made me happy, and I concluded that this would be the gentle, tender, respectful highlight of a day in which [I had seen] very little respect and tenderness, but then the door opened, and two young firemen walked in. They were not in full dress uniform but they had their FDNY shirts on, and I noticed their sturdy work boots, and somehow you could tell that they were firemen and not just guys who happened to be wearing FDNY shirts.

They took a few steps toward the bar, and then something happened that I will never forget. Everyone in the bar stood up, silently. The table of women stood up first, I noticed, and then everyone else stood up, including me. I thought perhaps someone would start to applaud but no one made a sound. The men standing at the bar turned and faced the firemen, and then the young Marine drew himself up straight as a tree and saluted the firemen, and then his father and uncle saluted too, and then everyone else in the bar saluted the firemen. I tell you that there wasn’t a sound in the place, not the clink of a glass or the shuffle of feet or a cough or anything.

After a few seconds one of the firemen nodded to everyone, and the other fireman made a slight gesture of acknowledgment with his right hand, and the bartender set two beers on the bar, and everyone sat down again, and everything went on as before; but not.¹

The heroism—the nobility—of common people. Maybe it’s there often, but only once in a great while do we see it. But then, we know it immediately. No one even has to point in its direction. A similar story might be told today about seeing doctors or nurses walking home in their hospital scrubs, or wearing some other haggard sign that they have dared to stare in the face of this virus

¹ Brian Doyle, “One Hundredth Street”, from *One Long River of Song*

that occupies our fear. These days we might, I think, offer some gesture that says, “We bow to you. Thank you, for the brave, dangerous, selfless work you are doing.”

And most, I imagine, would respond with the same small gesture, or a nod, like the firemen in Doyle’s story. As if to say, “This is just who we are. This is what we do.” Humility is a tremendously attractive character trait.

About ten or fifteen years ago, new scholarship appeared² suggesting that Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday was a planned act of political resistance. The Palm Sunday parade may have looked messy and spontaneous, but even the Bible’s account suggests that its details were carefully and deliberately thought out in advance. Israel at the time Jesus lived was an occupied territory. The Roman government kept a tight rein over the Jewish people, afraid that if they let up, there would be a political uprising. And so, the Roman generals had planned to eclipse the Passover holiday with an imperial procession, designed to remind the occupied subjects of the Empire who was in charge. The military parade approached Jerusalem from the east, toward the gate of the city. Roman soldiers rode on mighty horses, swords drawn, ready for battle. Residents of the city were expected to line the streets and watch this display of power with awe, and more than a little well-placed fear.

But that day, the common people gathered on the other side of the city, where another procession entered, from the west. This parade was led not by generals in military uniforms, but by Jesus, who looked pretty much like all those regular folks who had gathered to meet him. And he rode not on a steed, but on a donkey—which was the cheapest form of transportation available in those days. It would be like a parade today led by a 2012 Toyota Corolla. The contrast was startling. You couldn’t miss it.

The procession planned by Jesus and his followers was designed to be a direct affront to the imperial Roman army. A counter-demonstration, and it hit its mark. The people who lined the streets knew. They were like the crowds that gathered in the streets of Hong Kong last year, or years ago in Tiananmen Square, the Selma and Montgomery civil rights marches in this country. In Jerusalem that day the people waved palm branches, which is what subjects of the Empire did when the Emperor passed. They laid their cloaks on the ground, which is what the lower classes were required to do to keep the aristocracy from having to step in mud that ran in the streets.

And that procession of paupers, led by a small-town spiritual healer, made its point. That the Roman Emperor, the one whose titles meant ‘Savior of the people’, and even ‘Son of God’, did not have exclusive claim to those titles. That even awesome military power could be confronted.

The people at that Jesus parade knew they were conspiring in what could be the beginning of a revolution. If it kept gathering strength, if this Jesus was as smart as he seemed, if he could gather this kind of crowd and inspire them...they just might be able to do it this time. They might actually push the Roman army out of their city. Their country.

2 Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus’ Last Days in Jerusalem* (2007)

This was the hope that was fed on that Palm Sunday. Jesus was their charismatic leader, the one who might rally the people and lead the occupied Jewish people into the kind of revolution they'd been hoping for for a long time. Maybe he actually *was* the savior they'd been waiting for. 'I know. Let's make *him* our king!' The idea spread through the crowd, whispered, then shouted.

That parade may have looked like a show of humility, but they were sure that political power was its ultimate aim. It had to be—right? But there was much they didn't yet understand about their candidate for king. They had misconstrued what was at the core of this Jesus. And so this week that began with what looked like a triumphant build-up of momentum started to shift. What had looked like a mass movement of civil and political rights suddenly began to go south. The candidate wasn't cooperating in their victory plan. He seemed to have some different agenda, one they didn't understand at all.

By Monday, it was like Jesus threw the campaign into reverse gear. He seemed intent on turning his back on all the celebrity and adulation that the crowd was ready to grant him—power that he really could have leveraged into something! Instead of using it to his advantage, he seemed to squander it.

The very next day, the biblical story tells us, Jesus walked into the Temple and turned over the tables—the business operations—of the very people who could have been his best political backers. Why would you pick a fight with the people whose business of changing money had been going for the last hundred years? Shout at them about not using God's house for the right purpose? Was that a political strategy?

Political power seemed like the last thing on Jesus' mind. He was acting like he wasn't a candidate for anything. He seemed bent on walking away from all the possibilities that were being offered to him to advance his reputation, his public prominence. Instead he seemed to be walking toward danger...and then, even more alarmingly, toward his own death. He seemed to be emptying himself of power.

That's what Holy Week is about. Watching Jesus empty himself of all the prestige and power and privilege he could so easily have taken advantage of, and instead begin the slow and painful walk that would lead to his death at the end of the week.

Why is *this* the story of Jesus Christ? Why is a story of a humiliating death at the center of this tradition that bears his name and that has imprinted his followers—us—ever since?

Because Jesus knew something about God that no one else knew. It's a little slippery for us, hard to hold onto even now, two thousand years later. Jesus knew that the God who can save us doesn't run for office like a president or rule from a throne like an emperor or a king. Jesus' God—our God—changes the world by making a home with people, inside human hearts. Gives himself away to us, in actions that look like what firefighters did at the World Trade Center, and what doctors and nurses and hospital janitors are doing today. Like thousands of small, everyday acts of stubborn love and generosity. Jesus knew that the way of this God is not up, but down. That the way you take care of yourself is not to seek your own elevation but to lift up other

people. That what can save you is not to raise yourself up above the muck of ordinary life, but to go deeper down into it.

That's what this Holy Week journey to Easter is about. This year, more than ever, we have a chance to feel for ourselves what it means to be powerless, to wait like Jesus did for the goodness of God to re-assert itself, to shout its promise of life above all the noise that fear makes.

This year, maybe we can be slow enough and thoughtful enough to take in. Let's not miss it.