

Living in the Space Between: Living and Dying

Luke 19:28-40

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I often wonder what the disciples of Jesus were thinking on the day we call Palm Sunday. Like generations of Christians before us, we commemorate this day with a palm procession, waving palms and shouting, “Hosanna!” We remember the people of Jerusalem laying their coats on the ground in honor of Jesus as he rode into town, not on a handsome horse, but on a colt. The disciples cried out, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” It was a day to celebrate this teacher who had shown them miracles, healed the sick, and shared with them a message of love and salvation.

Yet lingering in the disciples’ minds must have been the words Jesus had spoken to them not long before, “Look, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be handed over to the Gentiles, and he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon. After they have flogged him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise again.”

In Luke’s gospel, this is the third time Jesus tells them that he will be killed, but the disciples never seem to get it. The possibility that Jesus would die, that he would go to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover only to be arrested, tried, and killed, was just too hard to grasp. Were they in denial? Unwilling to see the inevitable? Unable to process or accept it? What would we have done in their shoes?

Today, this day of palms and adulation, is the gateway into Holy Week, the most sacred “space between” in our faith, the space between living and dying. Over the coming days, we will walk alongside Jesus from the joy of the palm parade to his last meal with his disciples, through the betrayal of one disciple and denial of another, to his arrest and mock trial, and ultimately to his death. These are the last days of Jesus’ life, and as each pass, we come closer to the darkness we dread.

I wonder about the disciples because at some point, they had to realize what was coming. When did they realize that these same people shouting “Hosanna” on Palm Sunday would call for his crucifixion on Friday? When did they recognize they were living in the space between?

I think the closest we come to recognizing the pain of that realization is when we ourselves can see death, either our own or that of someone we love, not far in the distance. Elaine Pagels is a professor of church history at Princeton. After years of trying to get pregnant and with the help of fertility experts, she and her husband were blessed with a baby boy. But, when he was two, he was diagnosed with pulmonary hypertension, an illness that is inevitably fatal. The doctors said he had a few months to a few years left to live.

In an interview with Kate Bowler, Pagels shares what a nurse said to her at the time, “it doesn’t start with a death, it starts with a diagnosis”. The “it” she is referring to is grief, particularly anticipatory grief - the grief of anticipating death long before it actually comes. For Pagels, from that point on she and her husband lived with the knowledge that their beautiful boy,

whom they loved and cherished, could die at any time. He might grow and learn and play like any other toddler or preschooler, but that would not last. They were living in the space between.

Many of us have experienced anticipatory grief. We have loved someone with cancer or Alzheimer's or some other kind of awful disease that slowly leeches life away. Kate Bowler talks about this as living in two timelines or two realities. There is this moment when there are daily chores to do, errands to run, work to be done. And at the same time, living in the timeline of anticipation, overwhelmed by questions about a future we can't control.

I'm sure the disciples had those questions, as well. "What is his death going to be like? What is going to happen to me? Is there a way I can spare him some of the pain? Am I brave enough to go through this? Am I brave enough to stay at his side?" Anticipatory grief is a mixed blessing, I think. On the one hand, I believe it serves to help us prepare, as much as is possible, for the coming event we are dreading. On the other hand, it can leave us using all our energy worrying about something that hasn't even happened yet.

And, in that sense, I think we live in the space between living and dying in all sorts of metaphorical ways, as well. These are the situations in which we know life can be more, can be better or healthier, yet we are stuck on a path that leads to destruction. Take for example, the space between living fully, engaged with all the beauty and possibility that life offers us, and the painful isolation and emptiness of depression. Or living between a life in which you choose joy and one in which you become mired in cynicism. Or between being in a relationship or job that celebrates you and nurtures your growth and staying in a situation that is destructive for you. Or, as is true for many of us right now, between embracing the best of the life we have right now and worrying about what is to come.

The question becomes what will we do with the space between? In the case of our own death or that of a loved one, we are unlikely to change the ending. We can anticipate the grief to come, allowing it to darken the present as well as the future. Or we can ask ourselves how to make the most of this time between knowing death is coming and when it arrives? How do we live the most fully in the space between living and dying?

Over the last couple of months, several news outlets have carried the story of a Stanford medical school professor, Dr. Bryant Lin. Just over a year ago, Lin developed a terrible cough. He thought he had allergies and was treated accordingly. Yet, the cough continued, so he had a chest x-ray which revealed a large mass in his lungs. A biopsy confirmed that he had nonsmoker's stage four lung cancer and it had spread to his bones, liver, and brain. His death could be delayed with appropriate treatment, but the disease was terminal. He figured he had about two years before his medication quit working.

So, last summer, instead of giving up, he developed a class, "From Diagnosis to Dialogue: A Doctor's Real-Time Battle With Cancer", which he taught last fall. His goal was to help students understand the humanity at the core of medicine - to learn in real-time about the disease, its treatment, and what he was experiencing so they could more fully grasp what a patient goes through. There was a session on having difficult conversations and another on spirituality and how faith helps. He even invited his wife to share some of her experience as a caregiver with the class. In the end, the class inspired his students, many of whom decided they would specialize in cancer care and one who finally had an honest conversation with his mother about her cancer. Dr.

Lin did everything he could to intentionally use the space he had been given between living and dying.

When we find ourselves in that space when the end is not necessarily physical death but the death of a part of ourselves, we are gifted with a different opportunity. While progression toward physical death is inevitable, when the space between pulls us toward darkness and despair, we have the possibility of choosing life - the fullness of life God has given us. When a person has slipped into the darkness of depression, they can pursue treatment. When cynicism and negativity begin to drag you down, you can seek out what gives you joy and delight in it. If you are in a destructive job or relationship, you can create a support system to help you leave it. If you are consumed with worry about what is going to happen to our country or our world, you can focus yourself on all the good surrounding you in the present.

My words make it sound as if these things are easy. They are not. The closer you are to the destruction of some valuable, innate part of yourself, the harder it is. But, we can shift the balance from dying toward living, and we do that through the power of our faith.

Through all that Jesus suffered in the days between Palm Sunday and Good Friday, he kept his faith in God and the promise of resurrection. As he sat at the Last Supper and said, "One of you will betray me". As he cried out and prayed in Gethsemane, "Lord, take this cup from me." As he was arrested, bound, and paraded before a whole series of authorities. As he was mocked, stripped, beaten, and forced to carry his cross to Golgotha. And as he hung on the cross and said, "Father forgive them, they know not what they do." Through all of that, Jesus kept his faith in the goodness of God.

I know that many of you will not make it to the Maundy Thursday or Good Friday services this week, but I hope you will find your own way to mark these days and reflect on your lives. In what sense might you feel that the life is being drained out of you? Or that you are doing things that will ultimately lead to the death of some part of you? Or that you are consumed by anxiety and fear about the future? Or that you are stuck dwelling on a story from the past that seems to defeat you? What cross are you carrying in this space between living and dying? When you know, place it at the foot of the cross. Let it be buried in the tomb. Then come back next week because I promise your story doesn't end there!

May it be so. Amen