

Holy Week Unplugged

- musings from Anne McGuire, 2020

Anyone who knows me, knows how much of my personal and professional life is driven by the liturgies of and meanings inherent in the celebrations of Holy Week. But this year, all of those liturgies – readings, music, environment, gatherings of the faithful TOGETHER – have spilled all over the place and I can't pick them all up and put them back together by April 5. The last few weeks, in particular, have only brought more questions and concerns. Then I realized that we will not have Holy Week liturgies in the same way as we are used to. We cannot be together physically. We cannot walk together. We cannot raise our voices together in sorrow or joy. But what we CAN do might bring deeper meaning in years to come.

One of my earliest liturgical memories is from the Easter Vigil: I was probably just 3 years old (a very long time ago!). We started outside, around a fire. Very cool! Then we walked into a dark, a very dark church, with only this huge candle leading us, our own Pillar of Fire leading us through the dark unknown into a wonderful, lengthy celebration. I only remember the fire and the procession, to be truthful. Now that I know so much more about that liturgy, now that I have experienced it for decades, it is still a visceral memory for me that is with me each year as we gather around a fire and bless the Paschal Candle. But now that memory reaches back to Moses and the Israelites, being led by a Pillar of Fire for forty years, in order to reach the Promised Land. It reaches back to both Moses and Miriam singing with joy as they arrive on they complete their passage through the Red Sea. And we are reminded every Easter Vigil of that journey, and of the passage (think procession) through the Red Sea, arriving unscathed on the other side, picking up our tambourines, and singing for joy and relief.

So much of Holy Week is rooted in the journeys and promises of the Old Testament, as they are fulfilled in the final, earthly days of Jesus. We cannot forget Abraham and Sarah. We cannot forget Moses and Miriam. We cannot forget Isaiah, or Baruch, or Ezekiel. We cannot forget the Israelites plodding through every kind of terrain to find their promised homeland. But everything about Holy Week goes beyond a mere "don't forget." We need to intentionally remember.

This year's Lent, Triduum, Easter, and beyond, are not about specific dates. The calendar may give 40 days to Lent, but we might have to think of it as 400 days (a year and 40 days), at least liturgically speaking. Let us intentionally remember and hope:

On April 5, when the calendar says it is Palm Sunday, we intentionally remember crowds greeting Jesus as he enters Jerusalem, waving olive branches and palms. We also intentionally remember how we greet our neighbors when they are isolated but hungry, or who is greeting us when we enter a store to restock our own lives at home. Do we wave at those we meet, or simply look down and avoid eye contact? How can we be a people of faith on Palm Sunday 2020 if we cannot greet Jesus, cannot welcome Jesus, who is there in front of us daily? We intentionally

remember singing and shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David.” Today we intentionally remember shouting across the street “do you need anything?”, “have a wonderful day,” “blessings as we together journey through this pandemic.” Today we grab our own version of palms or olive branches, flowers or sign pasted in the window, and greet our postal workers and delivery drivers. This is the meaning of liturgy from the inside out.

On April 5, we also cry out, with Jesus, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” We intentionally remember the psalm in which these words are rooted. In 2020, we are burdened with the same sense of abandonment. But we remember the entire psalm, which concludes by acknowledging that God does indeed respond and save us. We remember, with intention and hope, that the cross is a cross of glory, and death leads to resurrection.

On April 9, we cannot wash one another’s feet, especially this year! Instead, we intentionally remember those who are caregivers in nursing homes, and are washing the sickness away, who are comforting the lonely, with love and care...those who are homeless and in need of shoes for their aching feet...those who walked for forty years through desert and mountains – who washed their feet? We intentionally wash our own hands, often and longer than usual, and with concern. As we remember, we will wash our own feet and consider Jesus’ words: “as I have done, so you must do.”

And on that same day, that same 2020 day of April 9th, we intentionally remember the layers of meaning that the Eucharist offers. “Do this in remembrance of me.” Do this. Share your food with intention, remembering those family, multi-generational holiday gatherings. Break your bread with intention, remembering manna in the wilderness and water from a rock. We cannot forget, but we remember in order to move forward and heal. Have a meal delivered to a friend home alone, recovering from her chemo treatment. Our table around which we gather is now a cyber-table. Check on family near and far, and provide words of comfort and remembrance.

On April 10, we cry out our remembrances, and place our lives in God’s hands. The focus is the empty, barren cross. Our isolation from one another is placed on Calvary’s hill. Our liturgy is being separated from our loved ones, our friends, our parish community. That separation is a heightened, and now intentional, remembering of Jesus on the cross, surrounded by thieves, foreign soldiers, and only a couple of friends. Probably no more than ten ? !! We must remember with hope, though, as Jesus promises, from his own isolation, paradise and provision to those thieves, his own mother, and his loving friend. Today, our liturgy will be a cross in our home which we walk by daily, where we are reminded (and remember) those promises: to Abraham and Sarah, after a shared meal in the wilderness; to Moses and Miriam, through Isaiah, from a dying Jesus. We intentionally remember by being a mother or son and taking care of one another in the limited ways we can.

We arrive at the Easter Vigil. It is April 11. We seem to be in a continual darkened state. Light your candle. Remember your stories of family and faith. We cannot be together physically, but we can be united in our own pieces of the Vigil as we add intention to our remembering. The beauty of the liturgy is being united “with Christians everywhere,” as we hear in the Exsultet. For this is the night! We have to remember with intentionality, for to forget is to lose meaning and hope, and to live in despair and darkness. We may not feel much like singing a joyful Alleluia, or ringing bells, but as we remember, intentionally remember, the journeys of our ancestors, we remember with Hope and Encouragement. The Easter Vigil includes the stories of our faith ancestors. Add in your own stories of promise and journeys, of hope and encouragement, of your family ancestors, of your parish ancestors. Renew your faith, your baptismal promises, and your commitment to God’s people everywhere.

I am a professional liturgist, and am deeply saddened that 2020 will mark a Holy Week that is non-liturgical (in the true sense of the word). But my faith, and the many faith communities of which I am a part, have given me hope, shown me love, and demonstrated the Paschal Mystery, all those dyings and risings, in every other part of my life. This year, I have to remember those experiences, with intention, as I move closer to this unique experience of Holy Week that is truly Unplugged.

Blessings to all.