

READING I - Isaiah 52:13-53:12

READING II- Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9

GOSPEL READING: Passion According to John (John 18:1-19:42)

Why the Drama?

Why does the Passion fascinate us? Why did Mel Gibson decide to make a feature length movie about this one day in the life of Jesus. Of course, he chose to focus completely on Jesus' suffering and death, but excluded Jesus' resurrection. Why would he exclude "the happy ending" and focus completely on this story of suffering and pitiable death.

Why does the Passion fascinate us? There are so many images of Jesus' suffering on the Cross. If you visit an art museum, you'll see centuries of paintings, sculptures, and drawings of Jesus' suffering. Many medieval and Renaissance depictions of the Crucifixion show women at Jesus feet mourning His suffering. Many images (especially medieval images) show angels in the skies lamenting, some trying to catch Jesus' blood in cups. The scenes seem to focus on everyone else's suffering with almost the same prominence as Jesus' suffering. This is probably a typical human reaction. Many of us relate to a disaster by thinking about how we suffered through it, whether we were directly involved in the disaster or not. This is not necessarily selfishness—it is certainly compassion, as well as a human need to relate to something on our own level.

But, why does this Passion continue to fascinate us? Perhaps we relate to the suffering—or the intense drama of the story. Perhaps we are completely fascinated that a man (though we see him as divine as well) would allow himself to be mocked, persecuted, and betrayed by his own people, when He seemingly didn't have to die this way. He was sentenced to die simply because He was honest and true. He was killed because He was a threat to the establishment—the Romans and the Jewish elders. But still, he could have remained quiet. Or He could have died a quick death, by some other means—suicide or murder. Why did He choose to die in this very public, embarrassing, and brutal way?

Maybe Jesus died this way as a sign that God understands our suffering. We certainly all experience suffering in our own lives. Perhaps we want to feel that God understands our suffering. We believe that when Jesus died on the Cross, he came to truly understand and *experience* human suffering. Because He was human, he experienced the imperfection of humans, including our desire for good and success, as well as our inherent faults and failings.

In our second reading today, Paul *reminds us* that Jesus is able to sympathize with our weaknesses because he has been tested in the same way we are tested by sin.

So, we know that God can relate to our suffering and our imperfections. But why can't we just focus on *Easter, the Resurrection, eternal life*? Isn't this much bigger, better news? Why focus on the suffering and death?

Perhaps we need to be reminded of the great gift being offered to us to put our own lives into perspective. On Easter, we celebrate this gift of Resurrection and eternal life, but *as humans*, we connect more with the suffering. We have not yet experienced resurrection or eternal life, so the *only part* of the Resurrection story we can relate to is the *suffering*. This might be the best explanation of why we focus on the Passion, and are so perplexed by the Resurrection story.

In the musical Godspell (and in the subsequent movie version), the Jesus character is surrounded throughout most of the production by His disciples. At times they question Jesus, struggle with their faith in Him and at other times, show immense love and loyalty. But, the same characters who act as Jesus' disciples and followers are also his detractors and challengers. After following and revering Him, they tie him to a fence and lament as they watch Him die, seeming powerless to stop the action.

The passion story that we read tonight tells us that Jesus' OWN people put him to death. [His own people—in the holiest city of His people--Jerusalem, during Passover, the Jewish holiday celebrating God saving the Jews from death and releasing them from slavery.]

Are we these same people? Do we continue to ritually send our God to die each year so that he can rise again, taking away our sins, our afflictions, and our sufferings. We relive this Passion every year. Every Palm Sunday and Good Friday, we read and dramatize this very personal and tragic story of suffering. We continue to be the same characters in Godspell, putting Jesus to death and at the same time, lamenting His suffering.

Do we need Jesus' death?

On Easter Sunday, we feel that we can start anew, like we've been given another chance to be a better person, to live a better life. But the only way to start anew is to put an end to the things that hold us back—our own suffering, our failings, our inabilities. We must allow that part of ourselves to die in order to be redeemed.

As Christians, we say that Christ came to redeem us—to destroy death and give us eternal life. Is this the only way God redeems us? Does this redemption happen only after death, or does it happen in small ways every day to all of us?

What are our personal redemption stories? Maybe our stories have not happened yet. Perhaps we have a redemption story, but we have not yet realized it.

So, how can we be redeemed in life—made new by the Holy Spirit?

Our reading from Isaiah today tells us that the Savior “gives his life as an offering for sin”

It says that “Yet it was our infirmities that he bore, our sufferings that he endured... But he was pierced for our offenses, crushed for our sins; upon him was the chastisement that makes us whole, by his stripes, we were healed.”

“through his suffering, my servant shall justify many, and their guilt he shall bear.”

Jesus died for our sins and imperfections. He died again today for us, so that we can be renewed.

We come here today with our tales of woe and suffering. We struggle through life with jobs we don't enjoy, bosses who don't appreciate us, family members who don't understand us, partners who fight with us, children that worry us, homes that are too small and too expensive, and the struggles of city life. We spend sleepless nights worrying about our problems and find it's sometimes hard just getting through the day.

With all those problems, it's sometimes hard to see the gifts that we *do* receive. The people in our lives who love us and care for us, the safety of our homes and neighborhoods, our jobs and livelihoods, the available seat on the subway and the short line at the department store on Christmas Eve. We are given gifts—little miracles from God, large and small, everyday.

All of us come here with our successes and our accomplishments. We also come here with our faults and our failures. In this season of Lent, as we focus on our internal spiritual health, we often become more aware of these faults and failures. Many of us may have reached this afternoon thinking, "Lent is over. Have I accomplished what I wanted? Am I a better person?" For many of us, we will feel that our job is incomplete. We may have accomplished some of our goals, but may feel that we have a ways to go.

Now, all of us have accomplished many things. It may be hard to recognize, but we are all successful in some areas of our lives. It is time to remember our accomplishments and successes. Perhaps one success was coming out of the closet, or even coming here to Dignity. Perhaps we've been able to overcome an addiction or overcome depression. It's time to remember when we have loved in the way Jesus taught us. It's time to remember when we have treated others with compassion and when we have been able to make our lives (or someone else's) just a little bit better.

Of course, all of us are sinners. All of us are imperfect.

Many of us have events in our lives we are not proud of. Some of us may be haunted by these events of the past. We may be sorry for things—a fight with a loved one, a hurt we may have caused, a lie we told, something we stole. Perhaps we are embarrassed about some things—addictions, internalized homophobia, poor self-esteem, struggles with depression. Perhaps we are conflicted about our lives right now. Perhaps we are haunted by the many things we have not accomplished and all the things we think that we'll never accomplish. All of this can make for a very unsettled mind and soul. It keeps us away from being loving people of God. It keeps us from focusing on the things that are important in our lives today and going forward.

It's time to free ourselves of these burdens. It's time to offer our suffering up to God and to focus on our future as loving and compassionate people.

In Paul's letter to the Hebrews, he advises us to, "confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help."

We drive our nails into the cross today—offering to God all of our promises for Lent. We offer to God our accomplishments and successes. We offer to God our faults and failures. On the Cross, Jesus takes all of our accomplishments and failures into Himself.

We will give up the burdens of our suffering, offer to God our love and compassion and look to become better loving children of God.