

Broken Open: A Holy Week Retreat Experience

Today is Palm Sunday, my name is Bill McNamara, and I am the Campus Minister for Liturgical Music. Our theme today is Dangerous Memory.

This week... this holy week... We've been here before. We know the stories by heart, still we tell them again. The stories of triumphant entry, of scheming and betrayal, of friends gathered at table, washing feet, breaking bread and pouring wine, of agony and denial, of arrest and trial, of capital punishment and death at the hands of the state, of a tomb where no one had yet been buried, and the same tomb found empty at the break of day.

We know the stories. In fact – and I'm presuming to speak for you who have made time and space for this retreat – we love the stories. We have learned to find ourselves within them. To locate ourselves and interrogate ourselves in the lead roles, the supporting roles, and the obscurity of the crowds. To feel all the feels and to relish the Alleluias and chocolate that will come in a week's time. Emotionally draining, but compact, contained, resolved.

There's both a nostalgia and a deep personal devotion about this week, but if we were to stop there, we would be missing the potential of its deepest meaning, its dangerous memory. What truly unleashes the power of this week's story is to map it onto our world's current reality and live the story in the present tense. Friends, the story has not ended yet.

Empire is still doing what empire did to Jesus.

God is still doing what God did through Jesus.

Empire is still oppressing, terrorizing, silencing, othering, condemning, and crucifying. That's what empire's got in its toolkit. And empire has become very good at it.

God is still showing up precisely where the suffering is, in the vulnerability of human flesh, standing there, close as can be, arms linked, chanting, weeping, viscerally feeling the full effects of the worst humans can do to each other.

So, the dangerous memory of Holy Week first of all calls us to go where God goes... To center those who are suffering under intolerable conditions and cruel structures, to hear and believe the stories that have been denied or devalued, to seek to understand what it's like to live under the crushing weight of oppression. That sort of stance may require us to break down our preconceptions, our prejudices, our priorities. It may also cause our hearts to break with grief and anger.

But that is not all. Because when empire does what empire does, God also breaks through the suffering with something entirely surprising, new, and transformative: resurrection. Cross and resurrection are forever linked and inseparably joined. No suffering is unnoticed by God, no suffering is unredeemed.

I don't want to give the impression, though, that we're caught in this cosmic conflict with God always having the last word but empire continuing to inflict violence forever and ever world without end. That version of Holy Week – that locates God's final redemption only outside of history provides solace and activates us as agents of comfort – but potentially, also breeds complacency.

And so, this dangerous memory of Holy Week also calls us to reject empire's tricks and tools, and to speak and act against the suffering these systems inflict. God wants to break through in so many ways.

- To break through our country's racist practices in health care, employment, housing, education, incarceration, voting rights, and immigration.
- To break through corporations that make record profits while vast numbers of people scrape by to meet their basic needs.

- To break through a system of policing that harasses, brutalizes, and murders black and brown bodies.
- To break through gun violence that terrorizes communities and claims lives on a daily basis.
- To break through church authorities that deny the full range of LGBTQ experience and explicitly withhold God's blessing from queer people living in loving relationships.

God wants to break through. And God is breaking through. That's what God does. And the story hasn't ended yet.

As we begin this week's journey together, here are some questions to consider:

- How do you want the dangerous memory of Holy Week to frame your experience of this retreat?
- Where is God calling you to break down a preconception or break open in solidarity?
- How can you align yourself with God's breaking through oppressive structures through at least one concrete action this week?