

Malcolm Clemens Young
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco CA Z19 (I9, B13)
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Luke 19:28-40
Psalm 118: 1-2, 19-

Palm Sunday (Year C) 11:00 a.m. Palm Procession & Eucharist
Sunday 14 April 2019 With Passion Narrative Lk. 22:14-23:56)

Isaiah 50:4-9a
Phil. 2:5-11

What Sleeping Rocks Dream

"I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out" (Lk. 19).

What is the nature of existence? Three hundred years ago Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) addressed this question in his essay "Of Being." He wrote, "The mind can never... conceive of a state of perfect nothing."

The reason for this is that all things are connected. To be, is to be in relation to something else and to God. To use Edwards' language there is nothing shut up in a room completely apart. There is nothing that has no effect on, or relation to, the whole. We are connected across vast distances of space and time. Edwards said, "[T]here is not one leaf of a tree, or spire of grass, but what has effects all over the universe."¹

On March 28, 1965 Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke about this idea in this very pulpit. He said, "All [people] are caught in an inescapable web of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."² The moments of greatest joy in my life have arisen from a glimpse of that infinite web of connection.

I was fortunate enough to have a job after college but it didn't start until the end of summer. After graduation everyone went off to the rest of their lives but my friend Scott and I still had about two months free. On a lark we went to the travel agent and fourteen hours later we were on the plane to Kenya.

We hoped to surprise our friend Nick at the most remote Peace Corps site in East Africa, but we had no idea how to find him. We had a vague recollection that once a week Nick went to a market town called Nunguni. We thought it might be on Thursdays. The day after we arrived was Thursday so we went through the streets of Nairobi repeating, "Nunguni. Nunguni. Nunguni."

We had no idea what this word meant. We wondered if it might somehow be offensive (like the word cesspool) because when we said it people seemed to walk off in disgust. Someone told us to go to the Machakos Airport which oddly enough was the bus terminal. And there we met someone who reminded us of the safari salesmen that used to wander the streets seeking out hapless American tourists.

He took us through a maze of streets and put us in the back seat of a tiny Peugeot 405. He demanded payment and then disappeared forever. The tiny car filled up with Africans, fish wrapped in newspaper, and a pair of chickens that kept pecking my friend's ear. It was almost like they knew he was from L.A. and had never seen one before. When there were thirteen people in the car we started driving and realized that the man who had put us in there was nowhere to be found.

We worried about being in the wrong car. We'd say "Nunguni" to the other passengers and they would nod or shake their heads in frustration as they got out of the car.

Finally my friend and I were the only ones left. We even wondered if we might be murdered. After driving through the most deserted wilderness the car slowed to pass through a crowd of hundreds of people. It was like a photograph from National Geographic. In that surging sea of brightly dressed Africans there was one mzungu, one white person. It was our friend Nick. We waved casually to him. He waved back and kept walking.

Nick did a double take, then a triple take, then a quadruple take. His eyes were coming out of his head. For the rest of the afternoon he was literally shaking with excitement. He had been feeling lonely and depressed. He couldn't believe that we'd traveled from the other side of the world to see him. We spent the day shivering with the joy of connection.

God is full of even greater surprises. God chooses an inconsequential, powerless and ungrateful group of slaves to be his chosen people. God names the youngest, least promising of Jesse's eight sons as the greatest king of Israel. God even changes the heart of Paul, the most zealous Jewish persecutor of the early church and he becomes the one to bring its message to the world.³

Palm Sunday is the Feast of Divine Unpredictability. Jesus rides a colt into Jerusalem. Huge crowds begin cheering and chanting joyfully. "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven" (Lk. 19).

I want to leave you here to rest in this moment of rejoicing for a little while longer. There are so many times when I see myself in the Pharisees. They say, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop" (Lk. 19). I don't know why they do this but I want them to stop too because I know what is coming next and it hurts.

Every year reading the passion narrative on Palm Sunday feels cruel to me. This is because we have to face a truth that we usually avoid. It forces us to see ourselves in each of the people around Jesus during his last days. The disciples seem impossibly blind to reality, incapable of facing what is about to occur. In them I see myself trying desperately just to think happy thoughts instead of coming to terms with what is real.

I am the disciple who cannot stay awake. In my own way like Peter I deny that I even know Jesus. Violence is so deep in me that when the moment of truth comes I too look for my sword. I'm like Pilate and want to just expedite the process. Like Herod I'm curious and long to be popular. I'm like the crowds taking strength in numbers and deluded by hate. I am the thief and the Centurion who realize too late who Jesus is. With the women who love Jesus we watch from a distance in horror unable to help.

Last week Nadia Bolz-Weber talked about practicing yoga every day.⁴ She clearly loves yoga. But at the same time she complained that the yoga she has encountered is, "a tireless font of affirmation." She says that ultimately it leaves people hollow inside. It becomes a way of "pawning off narcissism as spirituality" by refusing to acknowledge what Christians call sin. She said that people secretly know they are missing something but that it is so much easier to receive the affirmation than to acknowledge that everything is not just all about us. She said that if we repeat to ourselves the line, "You are a divine being; let go of whatever doesn't affirm you," if we really do abandon everyone who doesn't affirm us then we will find ourselves alone and unable to work out our own history.⁵

W.H. Auden ends his poem "Leap Before You Look" with a simple line. "Our dream of safety has to disappear."⁶ In short to be healed we need to recognize human sin. A flourishing human being has to come to terms with the fact that sin is not remote from us. Mostly we deny it, but in our own ways we contribute to the cruelty and hatred in the world.

The Bible often seems horrifying because it shows us who we really are. But Jesus knows this. He predicts that Peter will betray him. He sees that he will face his persecutors alone. Looking around the table at his last meal he understands just what the disciples are like, and what we are like too.

At the heart of the Christian journey lies a promise. It is not a reassurance that nothing bad will ever happen to us. It is a pledge that through our own crucifixion God will be there with us. God is not shut up in a room far away, pure and perfect. God is not unaffected by who we are or what we need. God is here.

What is the nature of our existence? At the end of his essay Edwards writes that to conceive of nothing we must think the same thing that "sleeping rocks dream."⁷ We are so connected that we can hardly imagine anything else. When the Pharisees ask Jesus to silence the disciples he replies that it would be impossible. The truth the crowds speak is so powerful that if they were silent "even the stones would shout out" (Lk. 19).

Across the vast distances of space and time, the spires of grass, the leaves of the trees, African chickens, old friends and sinners like you and me shiver with the joy of connection. In this inescapable web of mutuality let us celebrate the Feast of Divine Unpredictability. "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord."

¹ In this essay Edwards also says, "Space is God." Jonathan Edwards, "Of Being," *The Collected Works of Jonathan Edwards: Scientific and Philosophical Writings, Vol. 6* ed. Wallace E. Anderson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980) 202-7.

² I'm not sure if these are the exact words but Martin Luther King said something close to this in his sermon here 28 March 1965. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=so8kSH8lwIA>

³ Palm Sunday (3-24-02) A.

⁴ Grace Cathedral Forum 7 April 2019.

⁵ My friend's recollection of this conversation. " She spoke about the "tireless font of affirmation" leaving people feeling hollow inside (I remember this because I thought to myself how I wish she extended the metaphor and said it left them "thirsty for the truth in the drought/desert that is narcissism lol) like secretly they know something is missing, but it's so much easier just to receive the affirmation than acknowledging that it's not all about us. She did talk about the memes that are like "you are a divine being; let go of whatever doesn't affirm you" and that at the end of letting go of everyone who doesn't 100% affirm us, we're left isolated and alone, incapable of knowing how to really work through our shit with someone who cares enough about us to do that..."

⁶ W. H. Auden, "Leap Before You Look."

http://web.mit.edu/cordelia/www/Poems/Leap_Before_you_look.html

⁷ Jonathan Edwards, "Of Being," *The Collected Works of Jonathan Edwards: Scientific and Philosophical Writings, Vol. 6* ed. Wallace E. Anderson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980) 206.