

This Sunday is Palm Sunday and it is also known as Passion Sunday. Palm Sunday refers to the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem and Passion Sunday refers to the arrest, rejection, and suffering of Jesus that will unfold in Holy Week. As I thought about the Palm/Passion combination it brought to mind the lack of predictability in our lives. The followers of Jesus can barely ride the wave of enthusiasm from his grand entrance into Jerusalem before they find out that the authorities are arresting him.

Predictability, then and now, is not a reliable aspect of our life experience. The unanticipated, good and bad, visits our lives as much or even more than stability. Life events let us know that we better have an internal quality that will enable us to ride any wave that flows through our lives. I believe that employing a Christ-centered faith enables us to sustain buoyancy throughout the whole of life. A mind that is open to hope understands that God has established a universe that provides the resources we need as we cope with any and all circumstances.

A faith that provides hope is crucial when the good times are just a distant memory because we are presently overwhelmed by what has come our way. We see Jesus maintaining a hopeful faith as Holy Week unfolds. Jesus rides a donkey into Jerusalem over the cloaks spread on the road by the crowds as noted in the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark. The praise of “the whole multitude of disciples” indicated that they understood Jesus to be the much anticipated Messiah lifted up by the prophets found in Hebrew scripture. Jesus knew that his public ministry was being affirmed as he heard the multitudes sing words of praise.

Let us bring those words to life. Let’s embrace the spirit of those hailing Jesus on the original Palm Sunday and bring to life the words they shouted as Jesus rode by on a donkey nearly 2,000 years ago. Please, repeat after me:

“Hosanna!”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord”

“Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

The power and the goodness of Jesus’ teachings, actions, and ministry are acknowledged through such words.

On Palm Sunday the support for Jesus was loud and strong, but as the week unfolds the responses change dramatically. The words of the crowd at the beginning of week are “Bless and Praise him” and by week’s end they are “Crucify, crucify him!” The turn for the worse that was unanticipated by the vast majority comes to pass. Following Palm Sunday the week is filled with disappointment and eventually death for Jesus.

The disappointment, suffering, and rejection build through Holy Week. But throughout the week Jesus maintains his grip on hope as he senses the divine in his midst. As we see Jesus throughout Holy Week the question that arises for each of us concerns the presence of hope or its’ absence when things seemingly go against us. How do we react when the triumphant or relaxed moments of life seem like a distant memory? When times of difficulty, loss, or even tragedy come to pass how do we respond? Oftentimes I don’t do so well. Therefore, I write sermons like this to talk to myself and hopefully this conversation that I am having with myself is helpful for you as well.

Brain sciences have noted that we each have a disposition towards being optimistic or pessimistic no matter what our circumstances might be. The pessimist see the glass half empty, the optimist sees it half full, and the engineer see a glass twice the size it needs to be.

How do you perceive your level of hope in difficult circumstances? As I stated, brain sciences have noted that genetic make-up provides us with a disposition towards being optimistic or pessimistic. This disposition makes a significant difference in life. C.R. Snyder, a University of Kansas psychologist, did a study that compared the

actual academic achievement of first year college students. He discovered that a student's level of hope was the best predictor of their first semester grades in college.

A student's level of hope was a better predictor of their grades than were their scores on the SAT, a test supposedly able to predict how students will fare in college and highly correlated with IQ. Yet, hope is a difference maker in life. It offers an advantage in realms as diverse as school achievement to bearing up in onerous jobs.

One of the most telling demonstrations of how the power of hope-filled optimism motivates people is a study that Dr. Seligman, a psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania, did of insurance salespersons with the MetLife Company. Being able to take rejection with grace is essential in sale of all kinds, especially with a product like insurance where the ratio of "no's" to "yes's" can be discouragingly high. For this reason, about three-quarters of insurance sales persons quit in their first three years. Seligman found that new sales people who were by nature hopeful sold 37% more insurance in their first two years on the job than did pessimists. During the first year those with a pessimistic disposition quit at twice the rate of the optimists.

What's more, Dr. Seligman persuaded MetLife to hire a special group of applicants who scored high on a test for optimism but failed the normal screening. This special group who failed MetLife's normal screening outsold the folk who tested as pessimists but passed the normal screening by 21% in the first year and 57% in the second year. The disposition toward hopeful optimism was in this case more important than well proven corporate indicators, just like hopeful expectations were more important than SAT results for first year college students.

What does all this mean?

Well, research has shown that the sculpting and pruning of neural circuits in our brains continues throughout life. It is most prevalent early in life but an "old dog," like me, can also learn or make new neural circuit connections. Therefore, a temperament that helps us cope, like being hopeful, can develop over time. Our genetic make-up gives us a brain with certain dispositions but God also created our brains in a way that can be molded and changed over time.

Jesus is a role model of one who molded hope as his frame of reference. The events of Palm Sunday and Holy Week are good to know for historical reference. But tapping into the dynamics of Jesus' experience and response can literally be life changing. Jesus goes from the triumph of Palm Sunday and into the experience of tragedy in Holy Week and maintains hope. This is saying to us that when our circumstances offer little or no apparent hope then a faith response is needed to reach out to the hope that goes beyond sight, sound and circumstance.

Practicing our faith, which nudges our disposition towards hopefulness, molds those neural circuits in our brain. First, we practice our hope filled faith in small challenges and then move forward in exercising hope in the weightier challenges that visit us. When was the last time that your faith nudged you to maintain hope in a minor difficulty? Faith can be activated in all the small and non-consequential events to help us develop our hope-filled neural reflex reactions.

In fact, it is doing the small things in the midst of large challenges that enable us to make healthy progress. One of the larger challenges of life is loss. Loss of a job, a dream, a loved one, or anything that is meaningful to us. We have each experienced loss. Therefore, working through grief is an ongoing task and one of the greatest challenges. But with hope we can take small steps forward in the midst of a grieving process.

The following story is found in the book entitled *Swallowed by a Snake* by Thomas Golden. This story is helpful for me as I think about the small steps we can take in the time of loss as we attempt to travel towards a hopeful horizon.

“Long, long ago, in a place far south of here, there was a village at the edge of the jungle. This village was a peaceable place except for one major problem, the boa constrictor. These boas were not the snakes we know today; they were huge snakes many times as large as the boas of our modern world. They were uncontrolled animals whose viciousness was only exceeded by their appetite. Much of the time they ate other animals, but without a doubt the boas’ favorite dish was humans. Snakes would enter the village at will and eat whatever and whomever they pleased. There was no place to hide from these monstrous beasts.

One day in the village, a woman was speaking openly about her pain related to the boa. She spoke of those who had been devoured by this beast and was lamenting the state of affairs of having to live in such an unsafe place. She wondered aloud if there might be someone who could put this snake reign of terror to an end. Her hope was that the men, women, and children of the village could live in peace.

A man had been listening to her pain and suffering. He was the man who played the flute most beautifully. He pondered her words and knew that something must be done. He packed his bundle of maize and his small knife, and off he went into the jungle, playing his flute as he walked. The man carefully chose his spot in the jungle and sat and played his flute. He was aware that the boa was approaching, but continued his playing. Then without warning the snake attacked and swallowed the flute player with one whole bite.

The darkness from within the snake’s belly was complete. The flute player tried to make himself as comfortable as possible, then unpacked his belongings and took out his knife. He consciously and deliberately used the knife to cut away the snake’s belly a bit at a time. The snake reacted to this tremendous pain in its belly by making as much room for the flute player as possible.

The flute player knew that it was going to take a while to complete the task of killing the snake. He proceeded to cut and eat a bit of the snake’s flesh each time he got hungry. This went on for quite some time, and the snake was continually in pain. He made it a point to tell all of his snake friends to never again eat a human, or they would suffer the consequences of this great pain that he now felt. After a while the flute player came to the boa’s heart. Upon cutting this, the boa died. At that point the flute player emerged from the snake and returned to the village to play his flute. Everyone in the village was surprised to see him and asked where he had been. The flute player responded that he had been in the boa, and to prove it he showed them a piece of the snake’s heart. The people then knew that the snake was indeed dead.”\*

This story speaks about the grief we experience after loss.

It tells us that going into grief may at times be like being devoured. We are cut off from everyday life, we feel that our existence is confined, and we are surrounded by our grief like the flute player was surrounded by the snake’s belly. Our world is completely changed, going from life as we know it into the belly of the snake.

Imagine being in the belly of a huge snake. Dark. A very tight spot. Every place you turn, there is the belly of the snake. The entire environment is this wet, warm, restrictive belly, pulling at you to conform to its wishes. This is similar to the way a person may feel who is experiencing a deep loss. Sometimes the grief takes over, and you feel that your life has to conform to the loss rather than your own wishes.

This is where faith and hope come in. First, the practice of faith helps us to continue to move forward, even if it is slowly, in the midst of a challenge, loss, or tragedy. Moving forward and not getting stuck in a debilitating emotional state or circumstance is what hope-filled living is all about. Second, the practice of faith is not an insurance policy that things will return to what they were like before. Practicing our faith with the intention of maintaining hope will increase the likelihood that we will manage our loss in a healthy fashion even if it does guarantee particular results. We see this clearly in the events of Holy Week.

Jesus exercised his faith in the first decades of his life in all the small matter of daily living and, therefore, he was able to maintain hope during his arrest, trial, and even his crucifixion. Jesus did not measure his hope on a

personal scale because it ran much deeper than that. Jesus' hope was in relationship to God Almighty and the greater community. His hope focused upon future generations. Jesus maintained a hope that his present activities would live into the future even if he had an agonizing death. Jesus is a touchstone for each of us as we tap into the type of hope that he maintained in the small matters of life as well as the ultimate matters that unfolded during Holy Week.

Maintaining hope means that we trust that God has established a universe that will provide us with the resources we need so we can cope with any and all circumstances. A faith that nudges us to maintain hope in the small matters as well as the ultimate matters will be our focus next week on Easter as we celebrate a hope that goes beyond this life.

\*Swallowed by a Snake, Thomas Golden, Golden Healing Publishing L.L.C, Kensington, Maryland, 1996.