“Time To Get a New Fence”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

I’m sure I haven’t thought of this joke in many decades, but it may be time to bring it out again: “What time is it when the elephant sits on the fence? Time to get a new fence.” While you’re groaning or figuring out that I really am just a big kid, maybe I should tell you why I thought of it this week. I heard today referred to as Bi-Polar Sunday, and figure this is a pretty good way of describing a day that is described in the lectionary as both Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday. Here in Blue Hill, we definitely celebrate Palm Sunday, and we treat the day as just such a celebration. We shout Hosannas along with the crowd, maybe not quite sure what we mean by that. Hosanna is a cry out to our savior, and so we sing out, “Save us, Jesus!” That’s one side of the fence.

On the other side, if the elephant in the room tips just a bit in the other direction, we have Passion Sunday. In the past three years, I have not chosen to share the reading of Christ’s Passion on this Sunday, preferring to wait until Good Friday. This year, though, I have a keener sense of the ways in which every moment that we know in this life somehow contains within it these dual realities: joy and sadness, adulation followed by crucifixion and, I pray, death and resurrection. The fence we probably sometimes wish we could sit on, like the one the elephant sits on, can be crushed between the weight of many polar circumstances. I had already begun to pray about this seeming fact when I reread a poem by Yehuda Amichai, recognized by many to be Israel’s greatest contemporary poet. I’ll share with you a section of “A Man in His Life” but adapted for gender.

We don't have time in our lives

to have time for everything.

We don't have seasons enough to have

a season for every purpose. Ecclesiastes

was wrong about that.

We need to love and to hate at the same moment,

to laugh and cry with the same eyes,

with the same hands to throw stones and to gather them,

to make love in war and war in love.

And to hate and forgive and remember and forget,

to arrange and confuse, to eat and to digest

what history takes years and years to do.

We don't have time.

When we lose we seek, when we find

we forget, when we forget we love, when we love

we begin to forget.  (*Yehuda Amichai, 1924 - 2000; adapted for gender*)

Hmm . . . I wonder if it is really that we don’t *have* time, or simply don’t allow ourselves the time to sit comfortably with the way disparate experiences and emotions exist in our lives. I have thought of this, in part, because of caring deeply for someone who battles the disease of bi-polar disorder, remaining most often on the manic side of comfort. I would wish for him the more typical blending of mid-range emotion and experience. I wonder if we all try to determine on which side of Palm or Passion we fall this year, whether ready to praise and adore Jesus who saves, or raise fists in angry frustration because the world is not as we would have it be. Or, maybe, we recognize that it is right in the middle that we remain; we know that life contains such wild vacillations, and what we seek is the ability to balance as though on a high wire, straight up on that fence. Can I get an Amen?

I have been remembering my British Literature classes a lot lately, remembering talking about coincidences. They gave me Wordsworth and other Romantic favorites, and they solidified for me my love of 19th century British literature. I had three sections of eleventh graders, all studying Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*. I reminded each class countless times that if they chanced to read ahead, they should be sure not to give away anything of what comes in later chapters. Then, juggling three classes on three different chapters, I did it. For 300 pages, fifteen teenagers had held off reading ahead to know who was young Pip’s benefactor, and I not only told them it was Magwitch, but I casually referred to him as Estella’s father, and the whole room gasped. Only then did I figure out that I was speaking to a different class. The gasp was in disbelief that I had thrown out such a spoiler, as much as it was to have the many strands of the story so expertly woven together in the end.

That’s kind of how I feel all through Holy Week. I talked to a friend a few days ago, and knowing that I wouldn’t talk to her again until after Easter, I wished her a happy one. She smiled in saying that it wasn’t Easter yet, but we do have hope. Yes, we do have hope. We have hope, because the story of our relationship with God is that God became one of us in Jesus Christ. We have hope, because the story of our relationship with God is that God wants us to be able to rest in the knowledge that all the wild poles of experience that life offers really will find their way to a balance that includes goodness and joy. Paul writes to the church in Thessaloniki, “**13**But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. **114**For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.” Spoiler alert, we look forward to the joy of Easter.

Today, though, we stand both with the crowd that makes way for their coming king and savior and also with the crowd that calls out for Jesus to be crucified. We still do both, even though we know that God loves us so much that God offers us eternal life through Christ. We know that we continue to make choices of how to spend our precious gift of time, our precious gift of life in ways that are not helpful—not to ourselves and not to others. We know that we are too often quick to criticize and slow to forgive. We know that we too often believe that war is the answer, because to work toward peace takes time and patience we find it too difficult to extend. Yehuda Amichai recognized something about these challenges, though, when he wound up the stanzas I quoted with this line: “when we love we begin to forget.”

When we love, we begin to forget whatever else is wrong. When we choose the *action* of love, we forget the feeling of hatred. When we choose the *action* of love, we forget the desire for achievement above anyone else. When we choose the *action* of love, we forget to blame others when we ourselves have come up short. When we choose the *action* of love, we forget to rely on ourselves, and look instead for the strength of God, in whom we have the perfect model of love, Jesus Christ. Oh, this love that helps us to forget everything that has or might go wrong . . . Jesus Christ, our savior, walks before us today. Will we walk with him this week and invite him to walk beside us every day of our lives? May it be so.