

When I was coming along, my English teachers hammered home a simple point about the writing of paragraphs and essays: tell them what you are going to tell them; tell it to them them; tell them what you told them.

Maybe the author of Mark had the same teachers as me. In the first verses of this gospel, Jesus, not to mention John, tells us that he's coming to proclaim God's good news. And then, Jesus spends his entire ministry proclaiming this good news. And in the last week of his life, Jesus comes to Jerusalem, and says, "Hey everybody, here's the good news I told you about!"

The Kingdom of God has come near. Repent – that is turn toward this realization, refocus your minds – believe in the good and true news of God's possibilities.

In his essay, [Confronting Atonement Theology](#), Eric Folkerth asserts that *good news* was the anticipated ending of the Jesus story. If God and Jesus had some kind of blueprint or roadmap for their ultimate purpose, Jesus was gonna enter Jerusalem in a triumphant, buzz-worthy way, deliver the good news of God's presence, and nearness, and possibilities, and the newfound realization of this good news would transform the hearts and minds of a wounded people. Jerusalem was going to be a global, visible, tangible stage for hope and reconciliation. Come on everybody, go ahead and get you some of that good news! There's plenty to go around! Imagine Pentecost before Pentecost.

Good news: patriarchy, and privilege, and domination are not embedded in God's hierarchy. Good news: God's nearness disrupts, overturns, wipes away the disorder of tired and stubborn systems.

Good news, friends, there's a new world order! Good news, friends, there's plenty of goodness to go around.

Unfortunately, good news isn't always good news to everyone, specifically the Romans. For the Romans, God's good news is a threat. An immediate and dire threat. And so, Jesus is crucified before anymore of this good news can fester into a loss of political power.

The Roman response of crucifixion is a lot of things. It is tragic. Violent. Maddening. Painful. Mean. Spiteful. Ignorant. Selfish. Inhumane. And to be fair, it's also a response that is entirely expected and predictable. We know enough to know that the Empire always strikes back.

Folkerth also reminds us of what the Roman response is NOT. Crucifixion is not necessary. Unequivocally, God DOES NOT NEED, GOD DOES NOT WANT, GOD DOES NOT INTEND, GOD DOES NOT DESIRE the crucifixion of Jesus as a necessary payment for reconciling human sin. The journey to the cross is not masterminded by God, but rather it is the tragic consequence of humanity's rejection of God's good news.

We're here on Palm Sunday, Sardis, and we're standing at the apex of the city; we're on the Mount of Olives. And we're following Jesus to Mt. Zion. We've got a long week ahead of us. It is vitally important to take measure of why we are following Jesus. I don't, and I won't believe, that God whispered in Jesus' ear that the plan was set in motion – that if he'd just rile up the authorities, clear the path to the cross, the final events would be come to be.

I do believe Jesus knows he's on a clear course of collision with the authorities that will only end in capital punishment. You can't be as free

as Jesus and go undetected and unharmed by authority. But Jesus doesn't act because of the cross, Jesus acts in spite of the cross. Somehow, somehow, Jesus has unlocked and channeled an authentic connection with his Creator that fulfills his every need. Jesus fully embraces his identity as a child of God. And Jesus faiths, with every imaginable resolve, in God's everlasting yea over and above Caesar's stubborn and predictable no.

Jesus fully, wholly, universally, abundantly accepts the good news of God's presence, and the transformative reality of God's inbreaking world. Infused, enhanced, and elevated by this good news, Jesus will not, for one second, suppress, silence, or dilute his enthusiasm. Jesus will not, in any way, blemish his created nature and purpose. He's gonna be who God has called him to be.

"Do you worst," Jesus says, "Because at the end of the day, I am confident, assured even, that the most destructive tendencies of our systems, no matter how scary and traumatic in the present, are, ultimately, no match for the redemptive and regenerative powers of our loving God."

So...Bob, why the stump speech this morning? Why are you exerting all of this effort to tell us why the life, and more importantly, the violent death of Jesus was not a planned sacrifice to reconcile humanity and God?

Well...we have spent the better part of five weeks considering those qualities of Jesus that most resonate with our understanding of God in the world. We have known Jesus as a partner and collaborator; we have known Jesus as someone who is open-minded, who has limitless

creativity in expressing and claiming the salvific nature of our Creator; we have known Jesus as a listener, one who gives space and voice to the silent and habitually silent; we have known Jesus as the quiet healer, offering balm in the hidden, and vulnerable, and intimate encounters of our lives; we have known Jesus as a generous host, feeding us, and our neighbors, too, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

The world has known this presence, this divine spark in our midst. In Jesus we can imagine all this is good and possible. And then, some two thousand years ago, in a tumultuous and tragic and utterly terrible span of a few days, this wonderful presence is rejected, and ridiculed, and beaten, and tried, and convicted, and executed, and discarded in the most traumatic and heartbreaking of ways. And it's all SO senseless, that our only instinct is to seek to make sense of a series of senseless events. There must be a reason for all this, right?

So we make Jesus a sacrifice, and that way, we can wipe the slate clean. Or we make Jesus a king, who can be the version of David we always wished David could be. And since he's our king, we can look past all the flaws of kingship. No matter that the shoe hurts our toe, right, at least we've jammed it all in there, and it'll help us look presentable for the picture?

When we choose to only make Jesus a sacrifice or king, we don't just shoehorn Jesus into a specific role. We also shoehorn all the passion of Jesus' life into a weeklong span. Yes, a thousand times yes, Jesus emptied himself in Jerusalem. But Jesus lived a life full of passion before that fateful week, emptying his life of all the toxicities that prevent our full humanity. Jesus emptied his energy in partnership and

collaboration; in contemplation and resolution of conflict; in listening; in healing; in hospitality.

The old hymn proclaims, “If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul, just tell the love of Jesus and say ‘He died for all.’” I redact that verse when I sing it to my girls to read: “And say, ‘He lived for all.’” The gospel is good news that seems too good to be true. But let me tell you friends, Jesus lived as if the good news were true. Jesus came up from baptismal waters; he repented – that is he turned toward the truth of God’s good presence. And even if this new direction took him through Golgotha, Jesus had made up his mind that he wasn’t turning around. Because how do you turn away from what is right, and good, and complete, and whole, and divine?

So for me, the cross isn’t transactional. It’s not a payment. It’s really more of a tension. I am overwhelmed by the idea that Jesus loved SO thoroughly as to completely disregard his own safety in the pursuit of loving others. And I am also furious that the systems of this world so easily and so callously discarded the depth of Christ’s love. I think I am even more furious that they still do.

When I read the stories of our faith; when I rub shoulders with saints living and old, I want to be a partner, and healer, and listener, and reconciler, and host, and I want to do be all of those things with the fullness of Christ that have been so fully shared with me. I am eager to charge down the Mount of Olives. And yet, I’m still anxious.

Because this week, the cross has not yet been reclaimed as something more than the danger of pursuing God’s love. This morning, once I get past the pomp and circumstance of palms and hosannas, I can see more

clearly that Jesus will gladly endure the trauma of Friday in the pursuit, and in the sharing with others of God's authentic love. And I see more clearly that the roles of healer, and listener, and reconciler, and host, and neighbor are not just confined to quiet and comfortable spaces. I can see that receiving, embracing, and sharing good news will be met with the world's resistance, and that resistance might be brutal and violent.

Today, Jesus is defiant. And courageous. And generous. But it's not next Sunday yet, and I cannot contemplate how this kind of love will transcend the senseless, immediate, and final force of Rome's response.

To be honest, what I think of most are those children in Nashville last week, not to mention the children in yet-to-be-named towns who will no doubt be added to the list of tragedies this week or the next. I imagine their love. And I imagine all of the love that has/will be poured into their lives by the healers, reconcilers, listeners, hosts, and neighbors – the embodied Jesus – around them. And how quickly, suddenly, abruptly, finally, cruelly such a love and presence can be discarded. Not to mention all the systems at play that will keep working tirelessly to discard similar acts of love.

I know that sacrifice or payment is no answer – the appetite of such greed and power is insatiable.

And so today, I'm only left to hope, and admittedly, that hope feels more fleeting today than most days. I hope in a God whose creative compassion is more final than the swift, cruel, and brutal evil doled out by the systems of this world. I hope in a God who reconciles us, who

puts an end to the punitive and painful and combative and extreme responses of our woundedness. I hope in a God who can reclaim life even in the midst of senselessness.

In Jericho, Blind Bartimaeus, cried out to Jesus, “Hosana, save me!” and he threw down his cloak as Jesus passed by. And Jesus reminded Bartimaeus of good news. Bartimaeus, and a few dozen others follow Jesus into Jerusalem. This time, the chorus says, “Save us.” They too, throw down their cloaks, and this time, they wave their palm branches. And Jesus says, “there’s good news to be had.” And so they follow.

It's also not for nothing – Jesus rides into town on a borrowed donkey, a symbol of kingship. Later in the week he'll use a borrowed cross, the symbol of Rome's authority. He'll even be buried in a borrowed tomb, a symbol death's finality. But there is good news, Jesus has no need of kingship, or brutal authority, or captive death. He has no design on keeping the things he's borrowed – he'll return them all.

Jesus has told us he's going to tell us the good news. He's told us the good news. He's even told us what he told us. In the week ahead, we'll follow a challenging path from the Mount of Olives to Golgotha to an early Sunday morning. And we must faith that there is more than senselessness and sacrifice at journey's end. We must faith that there is life. May God give us the courage, compassion, and wisdom to turn and follow Jesus. Amen.