

ARTICLE

What Holy Week reminds us of in the midst of a pandemic

BY ALEX WARD

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I wouldn't have realized the next morning was Sunday if my wife and I hadn't talked about it the night before. I didn't even realize that it was Palm Sunday until I looked at Twitter after I woke up. And now, in the midst of Holy Week, I am struggling to remember if it is Maundy Thursday or Holy Tuesday.

Life in the midst of the coronavirus has caused every day to blur together. If the liturgy for Passover were written today, the opening question would not be "Why is tonight different from all other nights." Instead, we would say, "Why is

this day just like every other day?” Every day is filled with social distancing, a blending of one moment into the next with no end in sight, and an interminable supply of news fit to induce anxiety. Yet, this week, of all weeks, should provide us with hope and a reminder that this is not like all days and this is not like every week.

As I have written before, the [church calendar](https://factsandtrends.net/2019/04/29/why-the-historic-church-calendar-can-inspire-your-church/)

(<https://factsandtrends.net/2019/04/29/why-the-historic-church-calendar-can-inspire-your-church/>) is one way to structure time and the Christian life.

The calendar carries you from Advent and Christmas to Lent and Easter, before sending you out at Pentecost and finally, at the end (or the middle really), there is “Ordinary Time” as you await the next Advent of Christ. What is true of the church calendar in general is true of Holy Week. Regardless of whether you attend a church with all the “smells and bells” or one where the pastor wears skinny jeans and the worship service looks like a concert venue complete with fog machine and bass guitar, the liturgy of Holy Week reminds us in these moments of unending monotony that something unique was happening in the history of the world. The days leading up to Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection remind us that this was the hinge of history and the moment when nothing would ever be the same.

The Week had a purpose

Part of the reason that these weeks of social isolation are so debilitating is that they strip away our sense of purpose. Rather than wake up for a day structured around a job or school, our lives are now guided by which show we have binged on Netflix and the unending number of Zoom calls and Skype meetings. Even those fortunate enough to be able to work from home are left wanting more

because the virus has stripped any semblance of a routine or goals for the week (<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/how-coronavirus-screwing-our-sense-time/608974/>). The goal is simply to make it through intact while juggling a job, homeschooling children, maintaining your health, and managing the fear and anxiety that come from being in a pandemic.

Holy Week reminds us that purpose exists amid the chaos surrounding us. The disciples definitely didn't understand what it meant for Jesus to "set his face toward Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51). No matter how many times he told them what would happen, they just seemed to think that the goal was something else. But Jesus knew what his purpose was. He knew how the week would end and what it would mean for humanity. Even amidst all the busyness of Passover, and the cleansing of the temple, Jesus was not distracted from the cross.

For the Christian, this should be an encouragement because it means that our goal of just making it through this time is enough. We don't have to search out the purpose of the pandemic (as if we could). We only have to remain faithful in the daily tasks in front of us knowing that we rest in the completed work of Christ. Will the laundry still be there tomorrow or the dishes still unwashed later tonight? Possibly. But we are free from the anxiety of thinking we need to accomplish "one more thing" because we know that Christ has already set his face to Jerusalem and fulfilled all things (Eph. 1:10).

The Week had a hope

Hope is an interesting thing. Rather than have hope be a nebulous thing in a box like the ancient Greeks, causing us to question if it is good or bad, Christians know that hope is the promise of God. After Adam and Eve's sin,

God pronounces judgement, but he also gives hope in Genesis 3 when he speaks of a coming child who will crush the serpent's head, even as the serpent strikes his heel (Gen. 3:15). That hope is reaffirmed at every messianic prophecy throughout the Old Testament, and again in Luke 2 when Simeon and Anna rejoice that they have seen the newborn Savior (Luke 2:25-38). Holy Week was the moment when the hope of history came to a point.

In the midst of these unending weeks of isolation and sickness, it can be hard to remember that there is hope. Even Holy Week seems devoid of optimism as it progresses. The triumphant entry on Sunday becomes the betrayal in the garden on Thursday. The crowd that shouted "Hosanna in the highest" is the same one that shouted "Crucify him!" There is a definite turn in the narrative, and it looks like there is no hope. Jesus is betrayed, crucified, and buried. The disciples are scattered. Where is the hope?

The hope is the promise made before Holy Week started. It is the assurance that somehow, amid all the suffering, God is at work. The same is true for us in the midst of the pandemic, whether his work is seen in the acts of generosity as people care for their elderly and vulnerable neighbors, as they socially distance themselves to "flatten the curve," or in the moments of just reaching out to talk to someone because we are feeling isolated. Holy Week offers us a reminder that even in the middle of the chaos and pain and anxiety, there are moments of hope, we just have to know where to look.

The Week had an end

Easter isn't actually part of Holy Week. Holy Week ends on Saturday, and Easter officially starts the next movement in the church calendar. In some ways, it's strange that we end Holy Week with a dead Savior, scattered disciples, and an unfulfilled longing. But in another it is fitting, because the start of Easter is the start of the rest of history. So, of course we should have a new time to mark the calendar. The first disciples didn't know it on Saturday, but the end was coming.

It is good to remember this during these weeks when everything seems the same: there will come a time when the pandemic will end. We don't know when, or what the world will look like afterward, but a day will come when we look back. Some will look back with nostalgia to a time of proximity to family (or maybe frustration at too much proximity). Others will look back with sorrow because of family or friends lost, or lives displaced by the economic impact. We don't need to glide past the reality of death and sorrow. That is how Holy Week ends, with disciples cowering in an upper room and thinking their Lord is dead. Nothing is more fitting for Holy Week than holy sorrow.

But Easter is coming. And that should remind us all that there will be an end to our sorrow and social distancing—a time when we can gather together as the church and break bread with one another and talk without a computer screen or surgical mask between us. Holy Week reminds us that this is not like all other weeks, and also that Easter (and an end to this current pandemic) is coming. And that is the glorious hope that we have.



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