

**THE PASSION; MARCH 19, 2017;  
THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

Since the early church, the events of Holy Week have been referred to as the "Passion" spelled with a capital "P" and taken from the Latin meaning "to suffer." When we use the word in daily conversation a working definition might be 'what a person cares about.'

Putting the two together we can conclude that the events of Holy Week that led to Jesus' suffering and death – were provoked by what he cared about, -- to demonstrate faithful allegiance to God no matter what; this is why he came into the world, it was his mission as the Son of God.

What we care about is sometimes distinguished from what we do as a vocation. Like "my neighbor is an engineer by day but his real passion is golf on the weekend." The same could be said about Jesus: the life Jesus led prior to Holy Week was one thing, but the entrance to the Holy City, the arrest, trial and crucifixion were another. It was the later that was his real passion.

And this is at odds with the way his disciples saw him and much of the world thinks about him today. From the apostles to us, we tend to think of Jesus as a teacher, healer, and preacher first and criminal of the state and holy martyr second if at all.

When the role of Jesus as savior of humankind comes into focus his followers then and many today lose interest; for example, when Jesus says that he came to suffer and die, his followers either don't get what he is talking about or they reject outright, as Peter did, Jesus' talk of suffering and death; rather than see him as the Son of God and Savior, we tend to prefer to regard him as a teacher, preacher or healer; we strip him of his divinity because we are more comfortable with his humanity; yet his confrontation with the authorities, his suffering and death was always his first priority.

So to emphasize his teaching, preaching and healing as our primary interest in him is to miss the point of Jesus altogether.

Let me be clear. I am not saying that his life was two unrelated parts – the ministry in Galilee and the events of Holy Week. Indeed, they are intimately connected. One leads to the other. The first makes the second possible.

But to ignore the Holy Week portion of Jesus' life in order to remember the Galilee ministry is to misunderstand Jesus as he understood himself.

As society became more secular which started during the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment when the focus of scholars shifted to the rights of man and to human capacity and potential the need for a Savior diminished. Today we're not even sure whether we buy into the notion that there is or can be or needs to be a Savior of humankind. By 'we' I mean popular opinion not just in the culture but in the church. A clergy person in the WNY Presbytery a few years ago wrote a "My View" column in which he essentially rejected any idea of Jesus as Savior and said that his real value was in the principles he taught.

What a masterwork like today's Passion does and what our own observance of Holy Week in the Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday worship services does is to reset our understanding of Jesus. How does he save humankind? He dies for us; that is to say he remains true as a human being to what he stood for even though he became a scapegoat for the state and the church. He was subject to human corruption and politics and was executed because of the threat he posed to the authorities.

He cared so much for saving us from ourselves that he did not deny himself even when his life hung in the balance. Jesus' passion – his suffering – demonstrates what unconditional love looks like and requires – the willingness to put his life on the line for flawed humans and a broken civilization.

The presence of Christ in the midst of the disciples after the crucifixion – that is, what we refer to as the Resurrection – took away the fear of death those first followers had; they realized something greater than death was at work in the world; that death did not have the final say but the power of life another word for which is God.

It is a powerful message. Indeed, the world has fallen short of accepting and living by it for the most part;

but there have been moments and there have been people who gave us glimpses of what Jesus' Passion looks like when a person lets it guide own living. That's why there is a church.

To be willing to make Jesus' Passion our passion; to make our allegiance to the power of life, to God, our greatest priority and to pass that message along is the reason we're here. Amen.