

A Misunderstood Messiah

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Kate Braestrup is a chaplain for the Warden Service in Maine. The Warden Service is frequently engaged in search and rescue missions for hikers and hunters, and in the unforgiving woods and bogs of Maine, the ending of the story is not always a happy one. Consequently, a lot of her ministry involves trying to comfort the loved ones waiting are who are left behind. One mother whose lost daughter was eventually found said, "It's so cool that the warden service has a chaplain to keep us from freaking out." But I love Braestrup's response: she said, "I'm not really here to keep you from freaking out. I'm here to be with you while you freak out."

Chaplaincy, when you think about it, is really quite a strange job. After all, we - and I say we because I used to be one - we don't fix anything. For several years I was the on-call chaplain at the Children's Hospital of the King's Daughters in Norfolk, VA and when my pager went off it meant one of two things: a child had died or a child was dying. Trust me; I never fixed anything. But that's okay because I'm not sure that Jesus fixed anything either.

Truth be told, Jesus wasn't quite the messiah folks had in mind. Think about it this way: what did Jesus fix? Yes, there were individual lives that were drastically changed because of his ministry: a blind man saw, lepers were healed and rejoined society, a man possessed was freed, women were forgiven and empowered. But what did he fix? Jesus certainly didn't fix the problems of the Romans. At the end of the first Holy Week, the Jewish people were still subject to the violent whims of Caesar. And while Jesus multiplied fish and loaves, he didn't address either famine and hunger. Neither did he address poverty or the systemic causes of poverty. And yes, he healed some diseases, but after his ministry people still died from a variety of diseases. And while Jesus was anything but sexist, he did not fix, change or alter the cultural norms of his day. So if that's the case, what kind of messiah was he?

On the very first Palm Sunday, there were two processions into Jerusalem. One procession was from the west, the direction from which the Romans entered every year on the Passover holiday. Their procession would have entailed all the pomp and circumstance one can imagine, and of course a huge show of military power. After all that's why the Romans were there in Jerusalem. On Passover when Jews celebrated their freedom from one tyrant, Rome didn't want them to get any ideas about securing freedom from yet another tyrant. But there was another procession as well on this day with a group entering from the east coming down the Mt. of Olives. In lieu of pomp and circumstance, this ruler entered on a donkey. And instead of being accompanied by an army, he was welcomed and joined by the peasant populace of the city. And I have no doubt that they went crazy. It was, after all, such an "in your face" political response to the Roman's entrance. Perhaps this was the moment they had all been waiting for. This was when the messiah would show his true colors. This was when the glory of Israel would be restored. This would be when the world was made right. Only it wasn't.

Other than a scene at the temple involving some overturned tables, there was no confrontation with either Romans or with those in power. And Jesus was arrested, beaten, tried and executed as the Romans had done to so many so many times before. So much for the grand messiah who would usher in a new age of peace and glory.

I wonder if we're really that different from Jesus' contemporaries. Much of Christianity thinks of and prays to Jesus as if he were some kind of divine Santa Claus. The so-called prosperity gospels says that if your heart is pure, then God will answer your prayers and request for happiness and wealth. But even those of us who don't subscribe to such nonsense nonetheless pray that God will fix things and make them right. Liberals pray for social justice and peace in both the land and

in the world; Conservatives pray that our nation might return to a time when Christian values and lifestyles were assumed. Even the whole apocalyptic mindset - the Left Behind Crowd - that is prevalent through so much of Christianity begins with the assumption that God is coming to fix things - to make them right. But I wonder if Holy Week doesn't point us in a very different direction.

Going back to where I started, our Maine chaplain said that it wasn't her job to keep people from freaking out. In other words, it wasn't her job to fix things. And when you're dealing with death, exactly what are you supposed to fix anyway?

Tuesday night I went to see the movie Rabbit Hole with Nicole Kidmann. Kidmann's character is grieving the death of her son who chased his dog into the road. At a support group meeting for grieving parents, one of the other parents says, "Well God just wanted a good angle up in heaven." Kidmann's character says outloud that that was one of the stupidest things she had ever heard. She tells the group, "Well if God needed another angel, why didn't God just make one? Why did God need your son?" I'm pretty sure I was the only person in the theater laughing out loud at that point, but she was exactly right.

The worst theology is always at funeral homes because people are so busy trying to fix things. The best advice I ever got were the 4 h's: Hush, Hug, Hang around and Help if they ask. But the first H is always hush. Silence is borne out of a place of respect and an unspoken acknowledgment that it can't be fixed and that you are mature enough not to try. And so it is that our chaplain friend said, "It's not my job to keep you from freaking out; it's my job to be with you while you're freaking out."

In those words I we have some insight as to the kind of messiah Jesus is. People thought they were welcoming a messiah who would fix things so they could stop freaking out about the Romans or poverty or leprosy or cancer or Alzheimer's or death. But Jesus wasn't that kind of messiah. Instead, I think he was the kind of messiah who came to be with us while we freak out about the Romans and poverty and leprosy and cancer and Alzheimer's and most certainly while we're freaking out about death.

I'm not convinced Jesus came to fix things, or this world or us. I think he came to enter into the fullness of our world and into the fullness of our lives. Emmanuel; God with us even and especially when life is at it's worst. After all, this is a world where suffering and death regularly come to those who do not deserve it. It is a world of injustice. It is a world of economic disparity where those with keep getting and those without keep losing. And so the Jesus that enters Jerusalem this day offers no sweet platitudes. No words about God needing a good angel; no promises of blessing if you pray the right way. There are no easy answers; nothing that will fit on a bumper sticker. Instead he comes and offers himself: freely, completely and sacrificially. Chaplain Braestrup calls her ministry a ministry of presence. I think that's what Jesus did.

If he had come to fix the world, he wouldn't have entered the world as a helpless babe. If he had come to fix the world, he wouldn't have chosen the disciples he did. If he had come to fix the world, he would have come off the cross. Better yet, he would have never been up there to start with. And yes, it would be nice to have a heavenly fixer who could put things right. But we are going to have to do with a messiah who loves us so much that he came and entered our helplessness and our mortality. He embraced our death that we might know of his life. No matter what road we're on, it would be nice if someone was fixing the potholes we are constantly experiencing. But Jesus is too busy walking the road of our lives to fix the road. And so the good news is profound but so very simple: when we start freaking out on the journey - and sooner or later we are all going to freak out - there will be someone walking with us and sitting with us and waiting with us while we freak out. I know. It is not what we wanted. But maybe it is exactly what we need. Amen.