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### **John 12:12-25**

*The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna!*

*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—  
the King of Israel!"*

*Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written:*

*"Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.*

*Look, your king is coming,*

*sitting on a donkey's colt!"*

*His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. So the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify. It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. The Pharisees then said to one another, "You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!"*

*Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew, then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.*

### **John 19:16b-22**

*So they took Jesus, and carrying the cross by himself he went out to what is called the Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. There they crucified him and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them. Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews."*

*Many of the Jews read this inscription because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek. Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but, 'This man said, I am King of the Jews.'" Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written."*

**Welcome to Palm Sunday!**

Traditionally Palm Sunday is the time to reflect on Jesus' triumphant and joyful arrival into Jerusalem. But our Dwelling in Dissonance materials also include his

crucifixion on the cross, blending the joyful entry with a gruesome political execution.

I'll admit that my tendency has been to focus on the waving palms, and then the Easter resurrection, trying my best to honor the cross without dwelling there. But I recognize that this posture is not in keeping with much of Christian tradition. So this week I spent some time reflecting on the cross.

For starters, we should remind ourselves that crosses have been used throughout history, predating Jesus and the Christian movement. This first image (SLIDE) is an example of the Egyptian Ankh or key of life, representing life-giving substances such as air or water, and it predates Christ by thousands of years.

We should also take note that the early Christian movement was hesitant to use the cross as a symbol - which is understandable if we think about it. Would you want your new movement to be symbolized by a Roman torture device? Instead there was some preference for the fish. (SLIDE) The Greek word for fish, "Ichthus," served as an acrostic for "Iesous Christos Theou Yios Soter" (Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior). Kind of a fun code within a symbol.

Some of that hesitancy to embrace the cross, no doubt, was a fear that the Christian movement was worshipping death. One of the earliest known depictions of Christ is this Roman graffiti, (SLIDE) scratched into a plaster wall. It's a bit hard to make out, but let me show you an image that has the lines darkened. (SLIDE) The crucified Jesus in this image has the head of a donkey, a derogatory depiction as a beast of burden, and yet this follower is reaching out with adoration. Estimated to be about 200 years after Jesus' death, the wording can be translated as 'Alexamenos worships his god' indicating that the image was meant to mock a Christian of that time named Alexamenos.

As time went on, and as Christianity gained a foothold - especially a political one in parts of the world - the cross became more embraced, and symbolically far more varied than we sometimes assume. Here are a bunch of different ones from a variety of traditions. (SLIDE)

It took even longer for faith communities to embrace images of Jesus hanging from the cross. (SLIDE) Here's a quite common stylized crucifix, quite common in Catholic worship spaces, but these didn't show up until 3-400 years after Jesus' death.

As with most things, when they begin to mix with political power and military might, they get a bit messed up. (SLIDE) This image is an artist's rendering of Roman Emperor Constantine, who in the year 312 was said to have seen a cross of light above the sun, accompanied by the inscription, "By this sign, you will conquer," and conquer he did. Constantine became a convert to Christianity, blending it with Roman political power and military conquest. (SLIDE) Constantine ushered in a new kind of state-sponsored Christianity, cloaked by the cross on soldiers' shields, and across the Roman empire, and paved the way eventually for the religious warfare of the Crusades a few hundred years later. (SLIDE)

Constantine also encouraged the cross as a display of loyalty. In some regions it was encouraged to display in your home as a way to know who was loyal - both to God and the Emperor. (SLIDE)

In our American history, the displayed crucifix was somewhat limited to practicing Catholics, Anglicans, and Lutherans. Some traditions have even go so far as to deny the cross entirely. Ken Litwiller reminded me this week that Jehovah's Witnesses reject the cross symbol because it has pagan roots. They also reject the celebration of Christmas and Easter for the same reasons. They teach that Jesus died on a stake rather than a cross.

The cross continues to be present in our society in numerous other ways. The iconic New England church steeple is a great example of a common place for displaying a cross in a prominent location. On the flipside, the KKK used their horrific burning crosses as an intimidation tactic. The rise of American Evangelism brought with it public and personal displays of the cross - especially in jewelry. (SLIDE) The cross necklace, long worn by clergy in more formal settings, shifted the ornamental cross from primarily a private or ceremonial token, to a public symbol of faith. I remember getting the Breakaway magazine as a youth - Focus on the Family's magazine for teenage boys - and there was often an advertisement among its pages of a mail order cross made of iron nails... (SLIDE) while I never ordered one, I did admire the sort of tough guy way to publicly declare your faith.

Somewhere along the way pop culture began to embrace the cross as a fashion accessory - (SLIDE) music artists like Madonna and Tupac caused controversy when they tried to blend questionable lyrics with wearing ornamental crosses.

Mennonites have generally avoided displaying the cross (SLIDE). This image is of Germantown Mennonite's sanctuary, our oldest congregation in this country. Not a cross to be found. Though displaying the cross has also changed over time - especially when churches like ours move into a building from another tradition which has adorned each sanctuary light with multiple crosses.

And of course there are those who try to make the cross more of an artistic interpretation. My friend Jet helped to create this migrant Jesus depiction several years ago - a pointed way to highlight the plight of the migrant worker. (SLIDE) And then there are lighthearted artistic efforts like this one that a friend sent me - (SLIDE) I'm still debating if I want to try and build my own bungee jumping Jesus, or if that's just a little too heretical.

That's a lot. And it barely scratches the surface of the old rugged cross. I didn't even dig into the nuanced theological differences of displaying an empty cross, versus a cross with Jesus being crucified.

Theological reflections on the meaning of Jesus' death on the cross are known as Atonement Theology. The predominant one among protestant traditions is penal substitute - that Jesus death took the place of any payback that we might need to pay for our own sinfulness. But there are other postures as well. A popular one in the early church focused not on his crucifixion, but his supernatural ability to overcome death - demonstrating power over evil and death. Some theorized that Jesus' death was a ransom paid back to Satan, or that Jesus offers a model of obedience in that he did not fight back when he was sentenced to death. This posture corrects the trajectory of humanity going back to Adam's original sin to disobey. There are those who see the cross as structured order - that Jesus' death fits the consequences of humanity's fallen nature.

As Mennonites we have been cautious to glorify the violence of the cross. Our own scholars, such as J Denny Weaver, (SLIDE) have argued along the lines that a God that would require violence for redemption is not a God of peace and love. That in fact Jesus' death can only be appreciated as a salvation story if it reminds us of our God of life, even life after death. Our Mennonite Confession of Faith has surprisingly little to say about the cross, but in these two lines from the second article it attempts to blend a few Atonement Theologies together. It states, "In the shedding of his blood on the cross, Jesus offered up his life to the

Father, bore the sins of all, and reconciled us to God. God then raised him from the dead, thereby conquering death and disarming the powers of sin and evil.”

The more I dug into this powerful symbol this week, I felt myself being pulled in two directions. On the one hand I found myself wondering if my avoidance of the cross, my preference to focus on the Palm Sunday parade and resurrection was skipping over a key aspect of our Christian tradition. This cross is seriously meaningful for people - perhaps especially so if you have experienced a moment or lived in a culture where sacrificial death has played a significant role. It certainly seems that cultures with animal sacrifice, or even a deeper respect for taking an animal's life, would value sacrificial death more than I do.

This passage also includes the cryptic language from Jesus right before his death that the time has come for God to be glorified, as well as the somewhat biologically incorrect line about the death of a grain of wheat. (SLIDE) Even setting aside that misunderstanding about the life in a seed, we do know that death in nature is generally understood as an essential element in the flourishing of life. Without death, the balance of our planet would be thrown off entirely, and there is something painfully beautiful about the circle of life.

But on the flipside, if we focus only on the Christ's suffering and torture, we risk reverting it to a symbol of death and loss, rather than the signpost pointing toward the triumph of this miraculous resurrection and promise of eternal life.

One of my frustrations with the Nicene Creed, an ancient doctrinal statement meant to summarize Christian belief, is that it quickly jumps from Jesus' birth, to his death and resurrection, entirely overlooking his life and his teachings here on earth. I wonder if a hyper-focus on the cross plays a role in this tendency, to assume that the important part is the cross and the salvation that it offers, and to sort of skip over or avoid the rest.

I'm also aware that American Christianity has developed some unfortunate parallels to our dominant cultural tendencies - things like a focus on individualism and a personal experience, as well as a greater focus on the gift of the cross as a sort of get out of hell free card (SLIDE). If the only reason for being a Christian is getting into heaven, then yeah, I guess Jesus sacrificial death is a big deal.

But there's so much more to this whole thing, right? (SLIDE) The people waving palm branches as Jesus approached the city probably understood this better than we do. They saw a savior flipping the script of what they thought possible. They cheered on a figure on a lowly donkey rather than a conquering soldier on a war horse. They cheered on a leader who prioritized the least of these, and chastised those in power. They felt the momentum of his longing to lift up the lowly, release the captives, and proclaim a year of jubilee. And unlike us, they had no idea of the resurrection that was on the other side of the cross.

They probably also knew just how dangerous this was, proclaiming him King of the Jews, understanding that crucifixion was a popular torture device for those trying to undermine the powers of the day.

Perhaps what is required of us is to not overlook, but to acknowledge that the cross is part of the path, but in acknowledging it we both remember what led to this moment, and continue our walk toward the promise of new life in the future.

The cross, despite its horrific origins, remains a reminder that we dwell in dissonance. It is the intersection of human power and cruelty and divine love. May we remember to resist glorifying the violence, and also acknowledge that this instrument of suffering became a demonstration of solidarity—God entering fully into the pain and brokenness of the world.

As we transition from our sermon to a hymn of response, on this Palm Sunday, may we remember that the cross is just one step in the journey, but new life is found only by moving beyond the crucifixion. As we extinguish our final candle of this season of Lent, let us choose to live, serve, and bear fruit, celebrating the one who brought us life over death, knowing that life will come again. Hosanna!