

Message: Don't Wait Until you Die!

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Scriptures: Isaiah 50:4-9a and I Corinthians 15:51-58

Isaiah 50 ⁴ The Sovereign LORD has given me a well-instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being instructed.

⁵ The Sovereign LORD has opened my ears; I have not been rebellious, I have not turned away.

⁶ I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting. ⁷ Because the Sovereign LORD helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame.

⁸ He who vindicates me is near. Who then will bring charges against me? Let us face each other! Who is my accuser? Let him confront me! ⁹ It is the Sovereign LORD who helps me. Who will condemn me?

I Corinthians 15:51-58

⁵¹ Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed— ⁵² in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. ⁵³ For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. ⁵⁴ When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

⁵⁵ “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” ⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁵⁸ Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Sermon:

In the liturgical tradition, this final Sunday of Lent is known as Palm Sunday. We have the powerful imagery of Jesus riding into the city of Jerusalem, a parade route really marked by palm branches, often used to celebrate chariot races, with people lining the route with shouts of “Hosanna!” The celebration was dramatic. This Jesus who had preached and taught and fed the hungry, and healed the sick, moved along the route, riding on a donkey - of all things!

The imagery was striking. It was a full display of the juxtaposition of power – spiritually full of power and honor, and riding on an ass, the proverbial symbol of humility and lowest of power. So, we see a Jesus of the mystery. A Jesus who could come from a stable manger and yet change the world. And the message extends to us. Our conventional consciousness is overwhelmed with awareness of death, destruction, and corrupt power.

But there will be a day when we hear that trumpet, and in a flash and a twinkling of the eye, our consciousness will be changed. We will be imperishable. We will understand the connection of power with victory. We will know that victory is never power *over* another. Victory is *awareness*. And once aware, we stand firm. We let nothing move us. We give ourselves fully to the work of compassion.

The day is also called Passion Sunday, representing its Latin origin, meaning "suffering," as it pertains to the beginning of the end for the person known as Jesus. I suggest this imagery should be a model for you and me: a model of how to be present and powerful in spite of our weakness and incompetence. We have the ability to be powerfully passionate about living out a life of integrity and compassion. In fact, we are asked by Jesus himself to live this passionate compassion NOW. Don't wait till you die to go to heaven. Live now as if the kingdom has come.

Now here's a story. Grandma was getting old and tired and not well. Her grandson Kenny was in the room and they were talking over stuff. Pretty soon grandma says, "I don't know why I can't just go now and be done with this." Kenny thought for a minute and then said: "Well, grandma, I think they are doing some redecorating up there and your room isn't ready yet." Our purpose is to be our best right here and right now. Don't worry. They will call you when your room is ready. And don't wait till you die!

Sixty eight years ago, on April 25, 1954, I was baptized in my little home church to a commitment to this passion. On most days I have failed miserably. But I have had glimpses. Most of you know I was raised on a farm. But you may not know that we raised donkeys. I know the personality of a good donkey. They can be an amazingly loving animal. Even the magpies around our farm, usually scared and timid, loved to sit on the back of a donkey and caw and crow. I also know how stubborn a donkey can be.

Maybe I learned something from those donkeys, I don't know. I know how stubborn I can be on occasion. My best hope is that I can be stubbornly passionate in my compassion for my neighbor. Perhaps too I can learn from the humble and sure-footed nature of the animal we call "donkey."

So, here's another story. A group of frogs were traveling through the woods, and two of them fell into a deep pit. All the other frogs gathered around the pit. When they saw how deep the pit was, they told the two frogs that they were as good as dead.

The two frogs ignored the comments and tried to jump up out of the pit with all of their might. The other frogs kept telling them to stop, that they were as good as dead. Finally, one of the frogs took heed to what the other frogs were saying and gave up. He fell down and died.

The other frog continued to jump as hard as he could. Once again, the crowd of frogs yelled at him to stop the pain and just die. He jumped even harder and finally made it out. When he got out, the other frogs said, "Did you not hear us?" The frog explained to them that he was practically deaf. He thought they were encouraging him the entire time. Words of hope are messages of power. Don't wait. Speak your words now to comfort the weary.

Jesus did not fear ridicule, did not fear suffering, had no fear of abandonment by his closest friends. He faced death to overcome it. Yes, he died. But he didn't wait till the end to feed the poor, to heal the sick, to free the prisoners. He was the model of his message: don't wait till you die. Forgive now. Heal now. Be a good Samaritan now. His life and message suggested passion now. Compassion now.

And what does this mean for us? How does this translate to our passion? What are we passionate about? *Passio* is Latin for suffering. When we are passionate about something, we will sacrifice; we will give up pleasure for a cause. In this process, the transition from Passion Sunday to Easter Resurrection Sunday, we move from suffering to power. We overcome the pain, the suffering, the challenges to engage in the joy and celebration of life itself.

So, death, where is thy sting? There ain't none. Life is victory. That gives us hope. Traditional hope is based on power *over* others: greater influence, more money, increased social status, a bigger house, economic and personal security. But passionate compassion is hope that *changes* the whole understanding of the purpose of life.

That is our change in consciousness. The mystery is simple: when we lose ourselves for the cause of love and justice, passionate compassion, we find our imperishable power. In a world where power is measured by brutal force, it is very tempting to fight fire with fire. But remember, even fire departments usually use water.

You may have heard of the Four-Minute Mile? I mentioned earlier that my baptism was on April 25, 1954. Well just two weeks later, on May 6, 1954, Roger Bannister, a 25-year-old medical student, worked his usual morning shift at St. Mary's Hospital. Then he took an afternoon train from Paddington Station to Oxford in preparation for a one-mile race against Oxford University.

Like Bannister, the vast majority of mile runners had one goal in mind, aside from winning: to break the four-minute barrier. Since 1886, the most talented runners and best coaches had given their all and yet failed to run a mile in under four minutes. According to Bannister, the four-minute mile had become "rather like an Everest—a barrier that seemed to defy all attempts to break it—an awesome reminder that man's striving might be in vain."

At 6:00 pm, the race kicked off. Two runners, Brasher and Chataway, took the lead during the first three minutes of the race. On the final leg of the race with less than 275 yards to go, Bannister powered through with his signature explosive kick, took the lead, and won the race.

There was an aura of silence all around the stadium as the crowd held their breath to hear the announcement of the race times. Then suddenly, the race commentator announced that Roger Bannister, a medical student, had set a new World Record time of 3 minutes, fifty-nine and four-tenths of a second, becoming the first person in history to break the mythical barrier of the four-minute mile.

The winning of that race became an epic event of history. And the breaking of the psychological barrier against the four-minute mile was also epic. The record did not last long. Within 45 days, the record was broken again. Since then, about 1700 runners have run the mile in less than four minutes. Roger even wrote a little book called the *Four Minute Mile. What did we learn?* We learned that we have very strong barriers and resistance to change. What is your barrier? What is my barrier to a dramatic change of consciousness? Once we have broken the barrier to a change in understanding, all hell can break loose, as the old saying goes.

There was once a master spiritual advisor. He had many disciples. As he grew old and infirm, they begged him not to die. The master said, "If I do not go, you will never see!"

"What is it we fail to see when you are with us?", they asked. He would not say. As he approached the end, they asked again. What is it we will see when you are gone? With a twinkle in his eye the Master said: "All I did was sit on the riverbank handing out river water. After I'm gone, I trust you will notice the river."

If only we could notice the river much sooner. But we get focused on our own world view. We can't see angels. We can't hear any trumpets. We stubbornly hold on. We stay blinded by our politics, our religion, our fears of those who hold power, our fears of those who are angry with no power. When we notice the river, our awareness and our consciousness become flooded with new hope. Mark Twain once said: "I never let my schooling interfere with my education." I say it this way: "I never let my religion interfere with my faith and hope."

I love the promise from Isaiah 50, verse 4:

The Sovereign LORD has given me a well-instructed tongue,
to know the word that sustains the weary.
He wakens me morning by morning,
wakens my ear to listen like one being instructed.

My hope is that our core awareness and consciousness can capture and embrace passionate compassion in new moments of every day.

Don't wait till you die.

— John Carson