March 20, Liturgy of the Passion: Luke 22:14-23:56

by MaryAnn McKibben Dana in the March 2, 2016 issue

Read the author's column on the liturgy of the Palms.

Many years ago, before I was ordained, I attended a Good Friday service with an unusual twist. The liturgy featured the Passion story from the Gospel of Luke; every last verse of it was read aloud. As is often done, some lines of dialogue were parceled out to the congregation. But we did not read the words of the crowd, or even of the officials. We did not deny we knew Jesus, did not demand the release of Barabbas, did not shout “Crucify him!”; we did not mock or revile him, did not beg to be remembered in the kingdom. We didn’t even proclaim his innocence as the centurion does.

Instead, the congregation read aloud the words of Jesus. We said what Jesus said at the Last Supper, words we laypeople were used to hearing spoken only by clergy at communion. We broke the news to Peter that he would deny his Lord three times. We prayed for the cup to be removed and chided the disciples for sleeping. We read cryptic lines like “You say so” and comforting ones like “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” During the trial, we mainly sat in silence while the events played out around us. We told the daughters of Jerusalem to weep for themselves. And we cried with one loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

Meanwhile, pastors and liturgists spat out the insults and accusations that were hurled at Jesus. It was disconcerting to feel them directed in some way toward us.

I can imagine the pearl-clutching of the liturgically correct. Is this a convenient excuse for pastors to beat up on their congregation? Perhaps in troubled situations it could be. But the deeper objection is that we, the people, are not Jesus. We are the knock-kneed disciples, the fickle crowd, the expedient government bureaucrats, the Roman rabble looking for a show. Our culture’s foundational sin is to make gods of ourselves, to find any excuse to go our own way rather than follow the Lord of life. We are weak.

And yet in this story, so is Jesus. “God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross,” writes Bonhoeffer. “He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is

precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us." God's great reversal moment will come next Sunday. The no will be made a yes. For now, however, we are left to dwell in the shame of holy failure.

When *The Passion of the Christ* came out some years ago, Mel Gibson defended the gore of his movie on the grounds that he wanted to illustrate fully what Jesus went through, to make his case for Jesus as the true Messiah, the Crucified One. For me, giving voice to Jesus' words in worship drove that message home much more than Gibson's fetishistically violent film did.

Adam Hamilton writes about the mechanics of crucifixion in *24 Hours That Changed the World*. He notes that crosses used for crucifixions are not tall and remote. Imagine, he says, standing in a church chancel or on a stage and looking down at the people standing on the floor below. It's not a great distance. That's the vantage point you'd have while hanging, suffering, and dying on a cross. Immersion in this story brings us similarly close to the action—not in a voyeuristic way but in a way that builds empathy.

There's a special kind of heartbreak that comes from uttering the words, "Father, forgive them," only to have them followed immediately by, "They cast lots to divide his clothing." It feels something like shouting into the wind. And it's easy to miss the irony that despite Pilate and Herod both finding Jesus innocent of the charges against him, Pilate offers to have him flogged anyway, to appease the crowd, and perhaps simply because he can.

It's hard not to hear echoes of Jesus' temptation. His captors play parlor tricks, blindfolding him and asking him to identify which one hit him. As he hangs on the cross, the crowds double-dare him to save himself. They don't ask him to turn stones to bread, but their subtext is clear enough: "If you really are the Son of God, prove it."

The voices of the crowd come, relentless and cruel, and most of the time Jesus says nothing. Is he too weak to respond? Is it taking all his strength to resist the temptation to answer evil for evil? Or is his silence somehow his answer? Debbie Blue suggests as much: "Everyone in the story turns out to be against him: the fundamentalists, the liberals, the revolutionaries, the collaborators. And he is against no one."

Over the years, my theology of the atonement has shifted such that the cross means much more to me than penal substitution. Still, there was something about standing in for Jesus in the drama that brings home the point that he stood in for us.

What's more, tending to the role of Jesus in the story helps us make real the meditation of Teresa of Ávila some 1,500 years later: "Christ has no body but yours / No hands, no feet on earth but yours / Yours are the eyes with which he looks / Compassion on this world / Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good." No, we are not Jesus. But we are called to love as Jesus loved, to live in faithfulness to "thy will be done," to take up our cross and follow. And ours are the lips that utter words of grace and mercy, or do not.