

How Do You Plan for This?

Matthew 27:11-54

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Museum guides at the Louvre in Paris have noticed a strange pattern. Many people, after standing before DaVinci's *Mona Lisa*, walk away perplexed and even frustrated—complaining that it wasn't what they had hoped. Visitors seem underwhelmed. Why? Well, *Mona Lisa* is not just the most famous painting in the world—that means that it is also one of the most widely reproduced works of art in the world. In an odd twist, the very fame that leads to the many copies makes the original unremarkable, over-familiar. Yet, people still buy the posters and t-shirts because the fame of the picture has become more of a draw than the artwork itself. When the *Mona Lisa* was stolen several decades ago, thousands lined up to stare at the empty space on the museum wall where it used to be.¹ It might be we risk putting Jesus through a similar fate as we begin this Holy Week. Because Jesus' "fame" is more famous than his actual life and teachings, I'm not sure we take the time to see the real Jesus of this week.

Anthony Griffith grew up in the rough neighborhoods of Chicago's South Side. He is a stand-up comedian who moved his family to Los Angeles in 1990 to seek his fame and fortune. Within a week of moving to LA, he received two momentous phone calls. One was from the talent coordinator of Johnny Carson's "The Tonight Show," saying that they wanted to work with him to appear on the show — the Holy Grail for every comedian. The other call was their doctor, telling him that his two-year- old daughter's cancer had returned.

For the next year, Griffith lived a surreal life, caring for his daughter each day, gigging at clubs each night. He appeared on "The Tonight Show" and was a hit. They wanted him back. All the time, as his daughter's condition worsened, the talent coordinator for Carson kept urging him to keep his material light – "Don't be so dark and biting."

He was working on material for his second appearance while his daughter was in the hospital suffering from radiation treatments. "I have to be a clown," he recalled, "because I have to earn a living to keep my family afloat. And nobody wants a clown who is not funny." Suppressing all these true feelings, he was light, and he is funny, and the second appearance on "The Tonight Show" went even better. On the same day that he is preparing for a third appearance on Carson's show—he got a call from the doctor. The doctor told him they'd done all they could, and nothing else could be done for his daughter. He asked how long. The doctor said six weeks at most and that "they should plan for that." Anthony Griffith thought to himself: I had planned to buy my daughter a bicycle. I had planned to walk her to school on the first day of kindergarten. I had planned to take pictures of her going to her first prom. I was planning a career that now included "The Tonight Show." How do you plan to buy a dress for your two year old daughter to be buried in?²

How do we plan for a week like this—this week of Jesus' Passion? Every-

body that week in Jerusalem long ago had plans—the powers-that-be had their plans, people like us like to think we have urgent plans, Jesus, presumably, had plans, but how do any of us plan for this? The religious and political authorities had plans; they always have plans to deal with the likes of Jesus. Usurp, absorb, ignore, snuff out if you must. That's the plan.

T.E. Lawrence, better known as "Lawrence of Arabia," reflected on the success and ultimate failure of his trying to bring a measure of justice to those crushed under imperialism early last century, when he said:

We lived many lives in those swirling campaigns,
never sparing ourselves any good or evil;
yet when we had achieved and the new world dawned,
the old men came out again,
and took from us our victory,
and remade it in the likeness of the former world they knew.
We stammered that we had worked for a new heaven,
and a new earth,
and they thanked us kindly, and made their peace.³

The plans the authorities made early in the week probably hardly even thought of Jesus. Usurp, absorb, ignore, snuff out if you must—but keep a lock on the world that you know.

How was Jesus a threat to the world to which they held fast with power and threat and privilege? A colleague recently pointed this out: last year, a TV talk show host called on Christians to "look for the words 'social justice' on your church's website, and if you can find them there, run away. . . . [They] are code words for socialism, Nazism, communism. I picture that TV host among those who begged Jesus not to go to Jerusalem at such a politically volatile moment but to stay in Galilee, miles away from messy conflicts."⁴

Our faith is not about socialism, Nazism, or communism, but it is about justice and a religious tradition that challenges social, political, and economic arrangements that work to the disadvantage of the poor and vulnerable. Jesus embodied that tradition—he stood with the vulnerable of the world and would not leave their side. And that was a threat. Palm Sunday suggests that if we are following Jesus, we're right in the middle of all that mess and all those conflicts.

It was the spring of 1963 in Birmingham, and the civil rights movement increasingly looked defeated. The city had more jail space than the civil rights workers had people. But then one Sunday, reports historian Taylor Branch, two thousand young people came—no older than our confirmation class—out of worship at the New Pilgrim Baptist Church and prepared to march. The police were shocked. How much longer was this going to go on? How many more people were they going to have to arrest? The line of young people was five blocks long. As the marchers approached the line of police officers and dogs, the notorious Bull Connor walked out to confront them, shouting for the firemen to turn on the hoses. The line of young people came close, face-to-face with Connor and the firemen and police. Then they knelt and prayed. The Rev. Charles Billups stood and shouted, "Turn on your water! Turn loose your dogs! We will stand here 'til

we die!" After a few moments, Billups and the young people walked forward, the hoses dropped, and the firemen parted.⁵ What kind of faith does it take to nurture Christians capable of living like that? What kind of savior is this that we follow into this week?

We have plans for this week—we always have plans. John McWhorter, a linguist at Columbia University, writes about "path dependence." Path dependence refers to "something that seems normal or inevitable today began with a choice that made sense at a particular time in the past, but survived despite the eclipse of the justification for that choice."⁶ Does Holy Week give us any cause to change our plans?

Years ago, Duke University hosted Billy Graham as the Sunday preacher at Duke Chapel. The week before Graham arrived, the office of university security called with urgent questions for the chapel office, like: "Will Graham be bringing his own security people?" And, "All his security forces needed to be registered with the university police." If he was not bringing sufficient police with him, then the university police needed to be notified so that they could augment their security forces.

They were told that the chapel must be emptied for at least three hours before the service, in order that a thorough search could be made for bombs. The chaplain dutifully called Dr. Graham, asking him about what security arrangements he required. Dr. Graham replied, "I have the Lord as my security. I plan to fly into Raleigh-Durham on Saturday afternoon and rent a car and drive it over to the hotel myself. It'll just be me." It seems that Billy Graham was determined to be a follower of the Savior who entered the city riding on a donkey.⁷ Who is this savior, and what are *his* plans?

When Arcade Fire won a Grammy for album of the year, their lead singer came to the podium where a parade of egos had held forth all evening. Everybody expected a speech of triumph and self-indulgence. After all, that evening had already showcased Lady Gaga emerging from an egg, a short-skirted Katy Perry swinging from the ceiling, and Gwyneth Paltrow dancing in stilettos on a piano. Instead, the band said: "Thank you. We're gonna go play another song because we like music."⁸ Their "plan" it seemed was to do nothing except what they always did. To be who they always are.

We should watch Jesus—what he says and what he does, what he doesn't say and what he doesn't do—before we make our plans for this week. Jesus doesn't say to Pilate, "I'll be back to even the score." Jesus doesn't say, "This isn't fair." In fact, Jesus doesn't say much. Mostly, Jesus is silent. What does Jesus do? Well, while others appear fearful about what is happening, Jesus does not react to fear.

In his poem, "How to Hide Jesus," Steve Turner writes:

There are people after Jesus.
They have seen the signs.
Quick, let's hide Him.
Let's think; carpenter,
fishermen's friend,

disturber of religious comfort.
 Let's award Him a degree in theology,
 a purple cassock
 and a position of respect.
 They'll never think of looking here.
 Let's think;
 His dialect may betray Him,
 His tongue is of the masses.
 Let's teach Him Latin
 and seventeenth century English,
 they'll never think of listening in.
 Let's think;
 Humble,
 Man of Sorrows,
 nowhere to lay His head.
 We'll build a house for Him,
 somewhere away from the poor.
 We'll fill it with brass and silence.
 It's sure to throw them off.
 There are people after Jesus.
 Quick, let's hide Him.

In 1903, the German poet, Rilke, enjoyed a correspondence with a young aspiring poet, in which he offered this advice: "Be patient towards all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves." Then gradually, Rilke suggests, "You will live into the answers."⁹

Perhaps more than anything else this week in Jerusalem long ago, Jesus lived the answers of the consequences of God's radical, reckless abundant love, lived out in vulnerability in a world where we prefer to make our own plans. Fred Buechner once said,

You can hardly blame Pilate for washing his hands of Jesus.
 He asks so bloody much, this Jesus.
 Bloody is the word for it. . . .
 What he calls us to is the terrifying game of letting him
 enormously move us as the story of him
 lives and breathes and converges on us
 beyond all our ideas of him;
 as it bids us, moves us, to do and to be God only knows what,
 which can be a very bloody business indeed if we do it right.¹⁰

Stephen Tobolowsky is a character actor who has appeared in over 200 movies. Chances are you would recognize him, even if you've never heard of him. He plays Sandy Ryerson, a fired teacher on *Glee*. He was on *Heroes*. He played Ned – Needle-nose Ned, Ned the Head – in *Groundhog Day*.

Twenty years ago, he portrayed the leader of the Mississippi Ku Klux Klan in the movie *Mississippi Burning*. They filmed on location in rural Mississippi. For

Tobolowsky's main scene – a Klan Rally – they invited local residents to serve as “extras” in the crowd, and reportedly half of the two thousand extras used their actual Klan membership cards as ID. The speech Tobolowsky was to give was in two parts. The first was to trumpet the virtues of Mississippi life. The second was more racially charged.

The plan was to use the crowd for the first part of the speech, then send them home and film the second part, using close-ups. They shot take after take after take of the first part. But, an unexpected thing happened. One time, running through the speech, the director did not yell “cut” at the end of the first part. Tobolowsky, being a well trained actor, just kept going into the second part of the speech, the racially charged, hateful, Klan-laden part of the speech. The crowd reacted immediately. Not in a bad way. They started yelling: “You ought to run for governor! Tell it like it is!” The filming was stretching long into the early morning hours. After one cut, Tobolowsky was asked if he needed anything, and he said some tea would help his voice. One of the movie staffers yelled for Craft Services to get “Mr. Tobolowsky some tea.”

“Hey,” they yelled, “we need some tea for Mr. Tobolowsky.” The only person left working Craft Services that night was a 14-year-old African American boy named Joshua. The staffer yelled again, “Hey, boy, didn’t you hear me the first time? Get some tea for Mr. Tobolowsky!” You could feel the hostility rise in the crowd. Finally, Joshua appeared. “Joshua, did you hear me?” “Yes sir,” Joshua replied. The staffer turned to Stephen Tobolowsky and politely asked, “What kind of tea would you like?” “Maybe some Earl Grey.” And then the staffer turned back to Joshua and yelled, “Boy, get Mr. Tobolowsky some Earl Grey tea!” The crowd—already amped up by the speech—was even more on edge.

Joshua started to make his way through the hostile crowd to get the tea. Stephen Tobolowsky called after him. Joshua stopped and turned around. Their eyes met, and Joshua smiled. “Joshua, I’m sorry.” The crowd, with all these KKK extras, tightened around the 14-year-old employee, blocking his way. Joshua stood there, looking up at the men. He never said a word, but held his ground. He took a few steps and then turned around and said to the actor, “Mister, you keep doing what you’re doing. You’re doing a real good job. Don’t worry about me – I’m going to be fine.” And at that, the boy turned back toward the crowd, and Stephen Tobolowsky watched two thousand people part to make a path for the boy to walk through.

Later, Stephen Tobolowsky said, “What I learned that night from that young man was that courage is nothing that Hollywood makes it out to be—bravado, kicking down doors, or blasting away the enemy. Courage is a disciplined absence of fear. It is continuing on . . . continuing on in the face of all the obstacles or plans put in our way.”¹¹

Jesus, in spite of our plans, ignoring our plans, focuses on only God’s intention for the world. Because Jesus is so convinced that God’s love conquers all, he just kept going. He kept going. He kept going all the way to the cross, trusting God to carry it all from there. Carry Jesus from there. Carry you from there. Carry every one of us...through anything and everything...from here on.

Notes

- 1 "Mona Lisa and Jesus" by Jamie Arpin-Ricci, posted on Red-Letter Christians blog, April 3, 2011.
- 2 Anthony Griffith, "Best of Times, Worst of Times," The Moth Podcast, March 21, 2011.
- 3 As quoted by Jeff Greenfield in *And Then Everything Change* (New York: Putnam), 2010.
- 4 John Buchanan, "Amid Messy Politics," *The Christian Century*, April 19, 2011.
- 5 Kyle Childress, "Reflection on the Lectionary," *Pulpit Resource*, Logos, April 17, 2011.
- 6 David Brooks, "Tools for Thinking," *The New York Times*, March 29, 2011.
- 7 William Willimon, "Jesus: Redefining Monarchy," *Pulpit Resource*, Logos, April 17, 2011.
- 8 Jesse James DeConto, "On Music: Arcade Fire, Anger, and Longing," *The Christian Century*, April 19, 2011.
- 9 William Sloane Coffin, *Letters to a Young Doubter* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), Preface.
- 10 Cited in *Context*, edited by Martin Marty, December, 2010, Part B.
- 11 Stephen Tobolowsky, *The Tobolowsky Files*, Episode 39, "Contagion," October 29, 2010.