March 24, 2013 – Palm Sunday

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I truly love opera as you know. And since most of opera is tragic, I spend a lot of time crying. One of the most tragic things I've ever seen portrayed in opera is the Metropolitan Opera's newest production of Madama Butterfly. For those of you who don't know the story, it's about a young Japanese girl, nicknamed Butterfly, who falls in love with an American sailor, Pinkerton, who is stationed in her town. He's a complete jerk and only wants to sleep with her, so he goes through with a pretend wedding I order to accomplish that goal. It isn't pretend to her, however. It's very real.

In the second act, it's three years later, and Pinkerton has been gone to sea since right after their wedding. We discover that Butterfly has a little boy. One of the problems with this opera is that it's very hard to get a real three-year old to do what you want on stage, so they almost always use an older child, which is okay except that you don't get that weeble-wobble movement of a younger child. In the Met production, the little boy is played by a Bunraku puppet. Bunraku is that form of Japanese theater with nearly life-sized puppets being moved from behind by several people completely dressed in black. This little boy puppet was manipulated by three full-grown adults. It sounds a little weird, but the puppet's movements were so perfect that after a while you didn't even see the puppeteers. You only saw a little boy.

Since this is a tragic opera by Puccini – you KNOW it's not going to end well. The place where I started sobbing uncontrollably in the Met production is right at the end of the second act. Butterfly is overjoyed to hear that Pinkerton ship has returned and is in the harbor. We find out that Pinkerton has married an American woman (I told you he was a jerk) and they have come to take the little boy back to America, but Butterfly, not knowing this, settles down with her maid, and her little boy and prepares to wait, all night if necessary, for him to arrive.

The music in this scene is called the Humming Chorus and it's some of the most heartbreaking of all of Puccini's heartbreaking music. At the end of it, just before the curtain goes down on the act, the little boy, this little puppet in a white sailor suit, gets tired and snuggles into Butterfly's lap and goes to sleep. Knowing what was going to happen, I was absolutely destroyed. Michael will attest to it. I was wailing!

The reason I bring this up is that whenever I see tragic opera, or for that matter any other tragic theater like Shakespeare, I find myself wishing that somehow the characters would just change one little action and make it come out all right.

And I find I have those same feelings about the Passion story we just heard. If only Jesus had decided not to go into Jerusalem that day. If only Judas had changed his mind or gotten lost. If only, if only, if only. But like Butterfly, our Gospel story moves inexorably on to its inevitable end.

I'm not alone in this. Even though Jesus has told his disciples three times what was going to happen in Jerusalem, they persist in thinking he's going to be an earthly king who would rid them of the Romans for good. Some of the Pharisees think this too, as they order Jesus to keep his disciples in line. It's not clear from the text whether they are worried for Jesus or whether they are worried for their own necks if the Romans get angry, but it is clear that they know that the eventual outcome is going to be bad.

Then, at the last supper, Jesus tells his disciples outright that he is going to be betrayed by one of them. Like water, this seems to run out of their brains and they start talking about who was going to be the greatest once Jesus was on the throne. It's like they can't handle the truth of what Jesus had been telling them.

And even Jesus himself, having full knowledge of what was about to occur, asks, in his human weakness, if maybe God couldn't change the ending for him. It's only a brief moment of weakness, though, and he gets on with the story.

Once Jesus is arrested, Peter, too, tries to change the inevitable tragic ending, at least as far as he is concerned, and much to his shame, denies Jesus three times. Even Pilate and Herod try to soften what is being demanded of them by the Sanhedrin. Pilate says several times that he finds Jesus innocent, and Herod joins him in this to the point of their actually becoming friends.

And on and on. There is a paradox built into our faith story. We want with all our heart for the story to end differently, to spare Jesus from suffering humiliation, pain and death on the Cross. But if it had ended differently, if Jesus had lived to continue his ministry, could God's final victory be won? Of course we'll never know, because the story DOES include Jesus' death on the Cross. And without his death, there could be no resurrection.

And without the resurrection, there could be no hope for any of us. This is our faith. This is what we profess in the Nicene Creed. This is what we celebrate in the Eucharist. This is why we are baptized.

It's very human to wish for a happy ending. Why would we want someone good, someone we love, to suffer. What we're feeling is compassion – literally to suffer with someone. We feel pain at the death of Jesus. And that's not all bad. It reminds us how to enter into the pain and suffering of those around us – sometimes those quite near at hand.

And we have to remember that, in the end, this story is NOT a tragedy. The real story is not of defeat, but of Christ's victory. The real story is not of death, but of resurrected life. The real story is that God is in control.

We will have to wait another week to really celebrate, but Palm Sunday shows us that we are on the way there. And it shows us that no matter how we would like to change events to make us feel better, we have to go first to Jerusalem and to the Cross. There are no short cuts. There can be no Easter without Good Friday, and there is no Good Friday without Palm Sunday.

I urge you to take time this week to live fully into the story. Experience Christ's humbling himself to wash his disciples' feet on Maundy Thursday. Experience the fullness of the Last Supper, which is our first Eucharist. Unlike his disciples did, stay fully awake with Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane.

Follow the way of the Cross to Golgotha and experience the pain, loneliness, and sadness of the death of our Lord. Let your tongue sing of the glorious battle and of the sacred head sore wounded.

Don't skip any part of it if you can possibly help it. The more we give ourselves to the events of Holy Week, the more joyful and triumphant will be the finding of that empty tomb on Easter morning. And the more we understand Christ's journey during this fateful week, the more we can understand what he is asking us to do when he says to take up our cross and follow him.

Waving our palms and shouting, we've followed our King into Jerusalem. Let's stay with him until Easter.