

“Passionate Zeal for God”

Isaiah 56:7, Jeremiah 7:9-11, Matthew 21:12-14, 18-19, 28-32, Luke 22:15 & Galatians 5:22-23a

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There are three groups of people throughout the passion narrative. The Passion with a capital “P” is Jesus’ perfect endless love for us revealed to us by his death and resurrection. Passion with a small “p” is zealous emotion, a desire of unwavering devotion.

There is the fickle crowd giving Jesus a triumphant entry shouting joyful praises to Jesus, laying down their garments and palm branches to honor Jesus. They will turn and yell “crucify him” in just a few days. They are easily swayed by public opinion, look out for themselves, and seek the latest pleasure, self-help movement, or guru. Second, there is the religious leaders and pious who value rules, law, and tradition more than love. Finally, there is an eclectic group with one thing in common, a passionate zeal for God.

Which of these three groups are you in today? Which of these three groups do you want to be in the future?

James Montgomery Boice warns against appearing righteous on the surface but being without passion on the inside like many of the worshipers in Jesus’ day. Pastor Boice said, “I am convinced that in any normal gathering of contemporary Christians the majority have never done any consistent work for God and are unlikely to do so unless their present understanding of discipleship or their present life-styles changes. They do not serve in church offices. They do not teach Bible classes. They do not witness. They do not bring friends or neighbors to church. If the truth be told, they do not even pray or read their Bibles much. Yet they suppose all is well with them and that God is somehow pleased with their nonperformance. They would say that they have no time for those things, being so busy elsewhere.” Ralph Waldo Emerson identifies the emptiness of this group in one sentence. “Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm.”

Jesus’ final week as God incarnate in man was full of passion. Passion for us and passionate examples showing us how to be passionate for God. After the triumphant entry, scripture states **Matthew 21:12-13 NRSV** **“Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, ‘It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you are making it a den of robbers.’”** Jesus is not mad about the animals in the temple or the moneychangers—both groups are operating according to the law—helping pilgrims worship God. Jesus loves all people even those who repeatedly make poor choices. What Jesus is upset about is made clear by the scripture he quotes. **Isaiah 56:7 & Jeremiah 7:11** **“My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you make it a den of robbers.”** God deserves and desires passionate prayer. Prayer that changes the one praying enabling them to make their prayers reality with their passionate love. Today our bodies are a temple for the Holy Spirit, so at all times we enjoy communion with God. Jesus is mad about people who come to church and go through the motions without emotion, lacking the zeal to love extravagantly, they want convenient change yet do little to partner with God in transforming the world. Jesus is mad that some people never discover the full joy of life, because they are devoid of passion. Jesus is quoting from the prophet Jeremiah, **Jeremiah 7:9-11** **“Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name and say, ‘We are delivered!’—only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it declares the Lord.”** Simply coming to church does not make up for hatred, fear, and apathy in loving all people. God freely and graciously forgives us. God gives us a fresh start. Our forgiveness should stir our emotions, set a blazing fire in our hearts, and move us to passionate zeal for God, bold service, extravagant love, exuberant joy. Coming to church to just receive God’s forgiveness but never seeking to repent, to grow is abusing grace. That is what Jesus gets mad about when we choose to drift

lethargically through life, ignoring wonders, oblivious to blessings. Jesus came to make us fully alive, to make our joy complete.

Jesus clarifies and drives this point home by his action in the next verse, **Matthew 21:14 NRSV** “**The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them.**” The rules of the religious leaders prohibited the blind and lame from even appearing before the Lord. Such people were unclean, banished to the outer Gentile court of the temple. Jesus welcomed them and healed them, because they had passionate zeal for God. They knew their many shortcomings, challenges, and faults, but they desired to love God and love others. The religious leaders, money changers, those who looked good on the outside but were without passion, without any real desire to be in communion with God were driven out. Those who struggled with all kinds of challenges, full of sin, but had passionate zeal for God with a desire for intimate communion with God were welcomed in.

Scripture says the next morning, **Matthew 21:18-19 NRSV** “**Jesus returned to the city, he was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the side of the road, he went to it and found nothing at all on it but leaves. Then he said to it, "May no fruit ever come from you again!" And the fig tree withered at once.**” How do we know if we have passionate zeal for God? By our fruit. The apostle Paul said, **Galatians 5:22-23a NRSV** “**the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.**” The fig tree had leaves, on the surface it looked nice and healthy, but it was fruitless. This barren fruit tree symbolizes those who project a good image but because they are without passionate love, they are fruitless. God seeks disciples who bear fruit. External conformity to the law is not faithfulness in God’s eyes rather God wants passionate fruit bearers.

Jesus sums this all up with a parable, **Matthew 21:28-32 NRSV** “**"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first."** Jesus said to them, **"Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him."**

The triumphal entry, the cleansing of the temple, the healing of the lame and blind, the withering of the fruitless fig tree, the parable of the two sons all lead us to the same truth. God passionately seeks disciples who are passionate for God thereby spreading the fruit of love.

Jesus has passion for each person. Jesus died and rose for every person. Jesus will resurrect, perfect, and glorify every person. God is transforming our lives today and future generations through people who receive God’s passionate love and love passionately.

Those first disciples passionately followed Jesus and passionately loved. Yet on holy week, they became overwhelmed. All the people need healing, food, shelter, and employment. The political landscape was a disaster. Violence, anger, fear, and hate were everywhere. Jesus died. Those first disciples betrayed Jesus, ran, and sought to protect their families, friends, and their own life. The resurrected Jesus appeared to them and filled them with peace by forgiving their betrayals. None of them even needed to ask for forgiveness. Jesus forgave them immediately. After healing them of their emotional trauma Jesus invited them to join God in transforming the world. They saw how Jesus’ passion transformed everyone and everything even death to eternal abundant life. Each disciple in their own unique way transformed the lives of others with passionate love.

We are invited again this holy week to go on a transformational journey. To acknowledge our pain, grief, frustrations, wounds, fatigue and brokenness. To confess our mistakes and regrets. To lament the violence, tragedies, disasters, hate, fear, and all that is broken and twist in the world. To somehow wrestle with the colossal mess whether by intense prayer or sleep. To let it all go as Jesus exchanges it for peace. To experience God’s passion for you. To experience resurrection. To realize that all is becoming glorious. To rejoice. To become passionate in love to speed the day when earth is like heaven. To become passionate in love to bring more of heaven into your life today and the lives of all you love. To dream grand dreams. To celebrate because anything and everything that diminishes life is fleeting, every form of love is eternal. Each of us has our own personal holy week ugliness seasons which are being resurrected.

Will you be a passionate resurrection bearer? Will you live life abundantly with colorful emotions? Is your life inspiring love in others? The disciples left their careers, hometown and family to follow Jesus then spread the good news of the gospel which has now traveled around the world to billions of people. Mary worshiped extravagantly pouring out valuable perfume and rubbing it onto Jesus' feet. The aroma of her worship still inspires us today. A hungry boy gave away all his lunch to Jesus. Everyone around him saw only scarcity. The boy believed that if he gave away all he had that Jesus would bless all of them, and there would be abundance; and there was, as the multitude was fed with baskets left over. An outcast woman at a well with a troubled past helped a stranger, was honest, and received purify living water nourishing her and her town with abundant life. Passionate Peter not always getting it right remained eager to grow, zealous in following, relentless in seeking communion with God. Peter courageously walked on water. Peter bravely drew his sword to protect Jesus. Peter fervently pledged his unwavering support of Jesus and then fearfully betrayed Jesus. Peter didn't wallow in what ifs, wasn't tormented by guilt, didn't give up, didn't play it safe. Peter embraced God's forgiveness. Jesus blessed Peter. Jesus built the church on Peter's passionate zeal for God. Peter fervently shared the gospel exuding God's passionate love for all people drawing a multitude to communion with God. Peter still wasn't doing or even teaching everything properly. Peter was open to change, open to ever expanding love, as demonstrated by Peter following the vision that there is no unclean food. No one is beyond the grace of God. Peter, with passionate love, changed people's views who wanted to exclude some people to welcoming all people. Peter continually grew in his perception of resurrection transforming all. The Bible is full of stories of messed up, broken, mistake plagued, sin-filled people who received God's forgiveness and passionate love for them and then responded with passionate zeal for God. God partnered with them yielding grand, abundant fruit.

All of us will journey through dark holy week seasons. All of us will experience exhilarating resurrection. Holy week is the story of each one of us. Holy week is a story of depth-defying lows and ultimate highs. It is the story of life conquering death and salvation dominating sin. We are journeyers with Jesus. We join fishermen, tax collectors, Samaritans, prostitutes, demoniacs, cripples, and on and on. We join those who are pathetically unfit for the grand hopes God placed in their imagination; but, because of God's grace those grand hopes become reality. Holy week is the story of Jesus sharing our hardship, relieving our suffering, forgiving our sins, giving us hope and embodying God's passionate love for us. It is the story of God giving light to those in darkness, crossing every barrier, breaking down every wall and finding and inviting every person to the heavenly banquet. It is the story of redemption, resurrection, and abundant eternal life.

Jesus was passionate in demonstrating God steadfast love for us. During Holy week, Jesus said **Luke 22:15 NRSV "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover meal with you."** I hope this holy week will renew your passion for all the wondrous glory we can co-create with God today. Amen