

The passion hurts

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During Holy Week, it's common for worship leaders to ask people to consider their place in the drama of Jesus' final days. To what extent do we betray him, deny him, insult him, crucify him? When do we, like the crowds, find ourselves gawking at suffering with prurient glee? When do we, like the thieves, alternately ridicule the truth, then believe in it? When do we, like the centurion, make our confession--though perhaps a moment too late?

Perhaps my favorite character to help engage these questions is Joseph of Arimathea. Joseph, who is nowhere to be seen in this story until the bitter end. Joseph, a person in power who never signs on to the witch hunt. Joseph, who waits expectantly for the kingdom of God.

Does he find what he is waiting for?

In Matthew's version, Joseph hews the grave himself. Is this a hasty task that he begins once it becomes clear that Jesus will need it? Is it a Noah-like assignment, a construction project God asks him to complete? Is it a grave intended for someone else that gets repurposed at the last minute for the homeless Nazarene?

We talk a lot during Holy Week about how we crucify Jesus through our acts of faithlessness. Maybe Joseph is included in this. Does he try to sway the council away from their condemnation of Jesus? Or does he go along to get along? Either way, it's hard not to feel affection for Joseph, who undertakes the grisly and awkward business of removing Jesus from the cross, wrapping him in his final swaddling

clothes, and laying him in the tomb.

In the church I used to serve, someone cleaned out the safe deposit box and discovered that the congregation owned six plots in a local cemetery. I suppose they were donated by someone. I don't know what the church ended up doing with them, but as pastor, I always liked knowing they were there, in case we needed to be Arimatheans at some point in the future.

Joseph prepares a place for the body of Jesus to rest. In a sense, he follows John the Baptist's admonition from so early in the story, to "prepare the way of the Lord." Let us not skip right to Easter: the way of the Lord includes a humiliating death. Of all the characters in the passion story, Joseph allows us to consider what it means to create a space for the broken body of the Human One.

Joseph's gentle and thoughtful care of Jesus' body reminds me of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows. Harry digs a grave for Dobby, the elf who gives his life to rescue Harry and his friends from the clutches of Lord Voldemort. Harry insists on digging the grave not with magic but with his own two hands. Preparing his friend's final resting place is a grueling task mingling blood, blisters, and dirt.

One gets the feeling that Joseph of Arimathea would approve.

Sarah Vowell has a piece called "Shooting Dad," featured some years ago on This American Life. It's about her father, who builds cannons and other armaments as a hobby. Sarah is a pacifist and has a hard time understanding her father's gun-loving avocation, and the essay is about how the two work through that. Near the end, Sarah reveals that her father, after he dies, wants his ashes to be blasted out of the cannon into the Montana wilderness he loves. Sarah ultimately promises to do so-- and she vows not to cover her ears, as she has every other time she's gone shooting with him. "Because when I blow what used to be my dad into the earth," she says, "I want it to hurt."

I'm not one for egregious self-punishment. But our experience of the passion story should hurt some.