

April 2, 2023 Palm/Passion Sunday
Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church
Matthew 26:6-16, 30-50, 69-75; 27:1-5, 15-23, 27-37, 45-66
"A Case for Hysterical Punctuation"
Douglas T. King

"Death, be not proud,
though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful,
for thou art not so;
For those whom thou dost overthrow,
Die not poor Death,
nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep,
which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure;
then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.
Thou art slave to fate,
chance, kings and desperate men,
And dost
with poison, war, and sickness dwell;
And poppy or charms
can make us sleep as well
And better than thy stroke;
why swell'st thou then?
One short sleep past,
we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more;
Death, thou shalt die."

John Donne's Holy Sonnet number ten, one of many times

that Donne grappled with humanity's relationship to mortality.

The play "Wit" by Margaret Edson, uses this sonnet as a pivotal device in its tale of a brilliant and demanding English professor named Vivian who is undergoing treatment for terminal ovarian cancer. The play traces the arc of her treatment to her death. Early in the play Vivian has a flashback to her undergraduate days and an interaction with one of her professors on the topic of the previous sonnet. Her professor castigates her for the edition of the poem she chose to use in her paper and its punctuation of the final line.

I quote from the pedantic professor.

"The sonnet begins with a valiant struggle with death, calling on all forces of intellect and drama to vanquish the enemy. But it is ultimately about overcoming the seemingly insuperable barriers separating life, death, and eternal life. In the edition you chose, this profoundly simple meaning is sacrificed to hysterical punctuation:

'And Death-capital D-shall be no more-semicolon!
Death-capital D-comma-thou shalt die-exclamation point!'
If you go for this sort of thing I suggest you take up Shakespeare.

"Gardner's edition of the Holy Sonnets returns to the Westmoreland manuscript source of 1610, not for sentimental reasons, I assure you, but because Helen Gardner is a scholar. It reads: 'And death shall be no more, comma, death thou shalt die.' Nothing but a breath, a comma, separates life from everlasting life. It is simple really. With the original punctuation restored, death is no longer something to act out on a stage, with exclamation points. It's a comma, a pause.

"This way, the uncompromising way, one learns something about this poem, wouldn't you say? Life, death. Soul, God. Past, present. Not insuperable barricades, not semicolons, just a comma."

"Vivian responds, 'Life, death...I see. It's a metaphysical conceit.'"

This lesson serves Vivian well during her stellar academic career but as the doctors keep pumping her with the poison of chemotherapy and her body is failing, a conceit of any kind will not bring her comfort or understanding of this hellish journey. She has spent too many nights shivering and feverish. She has thrown up too many times. She has weakened too much.

At the end of the play, this solitary woman of many well-spoken words reaches inside herself to make one concluding statement regarding her condition. She returns to the words of Donne, but not with the punctuation of metaphysical conceit. Alone in her hospital bed she musters all her strength for these words, "And Death—capital D—shall be no more—semicolon. Death—capital D—thou shalt die—exclamation point!"

That is what this week to come is about, this story of Jesus' passion, of his journey to the cross. It is about the battle between life and death, and it well deserves a little hysterical punctuation. There is a reason we tend to shy away from this week. There is a reason the congregational crowds will be smaller on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday than on Easter Sunday. You see, we all want the space between life and everlasting life to be a comma. We do not want to see the betrayal and the struggle and the suffering. We want to doze through this week, like the disciples in the garden of Gethsemane. We want to jump

from a parade of palm branches to an Easter parade with frilly bonnets.

We do not want to open our eyes to all of this. But this is the week when the battle will rage. Jesus' life of praise and promise and parades will march straight into betrayal and defeat, and death. But without this struggle there will be no promise of eternal life.

Now Jesus does not face the forces of death in the form of illness. The forces of death that he faces are religious and political corruption, short-sightedness and small-mindedness, greed, pride, mob mentality, fear, human sin in many forms.

In our scripture reading this morning we heard tale of so many human weaknesses, so many human weaknesses with which we are quite familiar. We participate in so many small deaths as it were. In our clumsiness and our selfishness we often hurt other people, and we let relationships die. We ignore those who are suffering and in need and we let justice die. We forget the promises of our God, and we let hope die. There are so many of us who have let parts of ourselves just become numb and nearly die away. We have packed up parts of our humanity because the burden of emotion and concern just seems too much to carry day to day.

This does not even begin to discuss the weaknesses of the bodies we possess; they are brilliant and complex mechanisms, poetic in their form and function, and entirely destined to break down one day and just stop working all together. Whether we choose to think about it or not death is a part of all that we do, that limit of ourselves which shapes and influences our reality. Death is no mere pause. Death is no comma. No one in this room can conquer death,

and merely ignoring that reality makes death's shadow loom even larger in those recesses of ourselves where we think about the things we refuse to think about.

This week is all about death. It is about the battle between the forces of death and Jesus our Christ, who chose to fight this battle for us. It is about the many compromises that define who we are and the one who refuses to compromise in his commitment to God and to us. It is about this God who became man, became blood, and sweat, and tears to challenge death in all its forms on our behalf.

The story is gritty, and filled with disappointments, and a longing for an easier way, but we all know better. Death will not be defeated with sunshine and smiling words. Death will be defeated this week by a God whose love for us is deep and wide and desperate enough to bear any burden; endure any suffering; sustain any journey.

This week ahead is about our weakness and the strength of God alive inside this one man. Let us come to the table and be fed by the only one who can lead us through this. It is no time for commas. It is no time for conceits of any fashion. Bring on the semicolons and capital letters. Bring on all of the hysterical punctuation you can muster. This is the biggest battle in the history of existence and there is more at stake than we can ever metaphysically imagine. "And Death-capital D-shall be no more-semicolon. Death-capital D-thou shalt die-exclamation point!

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Edson, Margaret, *Wit*, Faber and Faber, New York, 1993.