

**Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer**

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The Eucatastrophe

Deuteronomy 34: 5–6

If you are one of that group of fellow travelers who has trekked with me through the book of Exodus over the past few months, this statement will appear old hat, but for others of you it might appear as news. In the Gospel of Matthew's presentation, our Lord is consistently portrayed as the new and improved Moses. Matthew takes pains to draw distinct and stark parallels between Moses' life and Jesus'. In Exodus, baby Moses' life is threatened; so, too, baby Jesus' life is threatened. Moses comes out of Egypt; Jesus comes out of Egypt. Moses goes into the wilderness for forty days and nights of fasting in preparation to receive the Ten Commandments; Jesus goes into the wilderness for forty days and nights in preparation to be the Christ. Moses goes up to the mountain to commune with God; Jesus goes up to the mountain to deliver a sermon for which he is known. Moses communed with God as friend with friend. Jesus is baptized and God announces, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." Matthew draws these comparisons between Moses and Jesus with great deliberateness.

But there is another parallel between these men's lives to consider as we enter into Holy Week: the shadow of tragedy falls over both of them.

After confronting Pharaoh and serving as God's instrument to liberate the Hebrews from bondage; after leading the Hebrew people ably through forty years of wandering; after interceding with God on behalf of his people in the wake of their numerous covenant disobediences, after many years of courageous and faithful service, Moses is not allowed to enter the Promised Land. Moses is only allowed to *see* the Promised Land from Mount Nebo – he is not allowed to enter it. Even as his people are at the cusp of the Jordan, ready to cross, Moses dies. One of my favorite Vacation Bible School questions for children every year is: "Where is Moses buried?" The right answer is, "Nobody knows." The Lord buried him somewhere in a valley of Moab, but the exact place is known only to God.

Likewise, Jesus, died horribly, reviled, rejected, mocked as the ineffectual "The King of the Jews." He died as bystanders wanted to prolong his torment on the cross to see if Elijah would come to save him. His tomb was not unknown, but it was borrowed. Of course, the weight Jesus bore throughout his life surpassed even the cross carried by Moses. Moses at least witnessed the liberation wrought by the Passover Lamb. In a complicated way, Jesus *was* the Passover Lamb.

As I try to put the deaths of Moses and Jesus in theological perspective, I come back to a word coined by the great fantasy writer J. R. R. Tolkien, author of the famed *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

The word is "eucatastrophe."

It means "a good bad event."

A eucatastrophe is a horrible event that ultimately serves as a catalyst to a great and good result.

Tolkien said that at the center of all great stories there is a eucatastrophe –

an event that is horrible at the time of its happening,

but one that ultimately sparks a series of events

that culminate in a consequence that is wondrously redemptive.  
Moses' death on the cusp of the Promised Land was a terrible event, but it had a liberating consequence. That none of the Hebrew people knew where Moses was buried was essential to their progress. Once Joshua led them over the Jordan River into the Promised Land there was no reason to go back. Once they had advanced, there was no need to return and pay homage to a shrine for a fallen leader. The anonymity of Moses' grave freed the Hebrew people to move inexorably one direction – forward. Likewise, as we peer on this Palm Sunday at the start of the events of Holy Week, events that cascade upon one another with increasingly deadly intensity until they culminate in that heart-rending cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" we know amidst our horror that we are viewing a "eucatastrophe," a horrible good event that paves the way for the in-breaking of God's transforming resurrection power.

We find it really hard to celebrate Palm Sunday with unalloyed pleasure. A pallor of ironic sadness hangs over the event. It is like looking at the photograph of a happy friend a few days prior to his death. And we must look frankly and fully at the sorrow and sadness that pervades Holy Week for only in so doing can we grasp the deep, deep love of our God for us.

Likewise, we cannot help but acknowledge the tenor of sorrow that pervades what we call the Last Supper. It is a supper of sadness. At the end of this supper, Jesus' original fellowship will break apart, the first Christian small group falls asunder. Upon the ending of this meal ensues treachery, betrayal, cowardice, arrest, torture and gruesome death. In truth our Lord's Last Supper was a eucatastrophe, too, a supper of sadness that paves the way for joy, a supper of sorrow that paves the way for the in-breaking of God's resurrection Spirit, for the in-breaking of a day that changes the whole definition and direction of history. Even so, there is something raw and elemental in symbols of a broken body and spilled blood that speak to us of the costly love of God. Our Lord invites us to sup at this table and share his meal before the cross. Come, let us eat together.

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Palm Sunday Communion Homily