

James Weldon Johnson, a giant of the Harlem Renaissance, was a poet, diplomat, and a scholar. He was appointed by Theodore Roosevelt as the US Consul in Venezuela, and in 1934, was the first African American professor to be hired by NYU. Johnson has a feast day on our Episcopal calendar of Saints on June 25th--he is perhaps most famous for being the author of the words to the beautiful hymn "Lift Every Voice and Sing." In 1927 Johnson wrote a book of sermons in verse called God's Trombones.

Ten years before its publication Johnson, was sent as a field officer for the NAACP to investigate one of the most gruesome lynchings in American history in Memphis, Tennessee.

One of the most famous poems from God's Trombones is called the Crucifixion. You can hear the immediacy of the language, as though he is there witnessing Jesus' death himself. The starkness and economy of language that he uses is reminiscent of Mark's gospel. The poem goes like this:

Jesus, my gentle Jesus,
 Walking in the dark of the Garden --
 The Garden of Gethsemane,
 Saying to the three disciples:
 Sorrow is in my soul --
 Even unto death;
 Tarry ye here a little while,
 And watch with me.

Jesus, my burdened Jesus,
 Praying in the dark of the Garden --
 The Garden of Gethsemane.
 Saying: Father,
 Oh, Father,
 This bitter cup,

This bitter cup,
 Let it pass from me.

Jesus, my sorrowing Jesus,
 The sweat like drops of blood upon his brow,
 Talking with his Father,
 While the three disciples slept,
 Saying: Father,
 Oh, Father,
 Not as I will,

Not as I will,
But let thy will be done.

Oh, look at black-hearted Judas --
Sneaking through the dark of the Garden --
Leading his crucifying mob.
Oh, God!
Strike him down!
Why *don't* you strike him down,
Before he plants his traitor's kiss
Upon my Jesus' cheek?

And they take my blameless Jesus,
And they drag him to the Governor,
To the mighty Roman Governor.
Great Pilate seated in his hall,--
Great Pilate on his judgment seat,
Said: In this man I find no fault.
I find no fault in him.
And Pilate washed his hands.

But they cried out, saying:
Crucify him!--
Crucify him!--
Crucify him!--
His blood be on our heads.
And they beat my loving Jesus,
They spit on my precious Jesus;
They dressed him up in a purple robe,
They put a crown of thorns upon his head,
And they pressed it down --
Oh, they pressed it down --
And they mocked my sweet King Jesus.

Up Golgotha's rugged road
I see my Jesus go.
I see him sink beneath the load,
I see my drooping Jesus sink.
And then they laid hold on Simon,
Black Simon, yes, black Simon;
They put the cross on Simon,
And Simon bore the cross.

On Calvary, on Calvary,
They crucified my Jesus.
They nailed him to the cruel tree,
And the hammer!
The hammer!
The hammer!
Rang through Jerusalem's streets.
The hammer!
The hammer!

The hammer!
Rang through Jerusalem's streets.

Jesus, my lamb-like Jesus,
Shivering as the nails go through his hands;
Jesus, my lamb-like Jesus,
Shivering as the nails go through his feet.
Jesus, my darling Jesus,
Groaning as the Roman spear plunged in his side;
Jesus, my darling Jesus,
Groaning as the blood came spurting from his wound.
Oh, look how they done my Jesus.

Mary,
Weeping Mary,
Sees her poor little Jesus on the cross.
Mary,
Weeping Mary,
Sees her sweet, baby Jesus on the cruel cross,
Hanging between two thieves.

And Jesus, my lonesome Jesus,
Called out once more to his Father,
Saying:
My God,
My God,
Why hast thou forsaken me?
And he drooped his head and died.

And the veil of the temple was split in two,
The midday sun refused to shine,

The thunder rumbled and the lightning wrote
 An unknown language in the sky.
 What a day! Lord, what a day!
 When my blessed Jesus died.

Oh, I tremble, yes, I tremble,
 It causes me to tremble, tremble,
 When I think how Jesus died;
 Died on the steeps of Calvary,
 How Jesus died for sinners,
 Sinners like you and me.

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The story of the passion brings us face to face with the senseless violence that human beings are capable of. From a human perspective there can be no justification for the crucifixion of Jesus. The great mystery of the Passion of Jesus is that he was put to death at the insistence of an unrestrained, hysterical, and angry mob. Jesus' death was an extrajudicial killing—the trial that was ginned up for Jesus by the powers that be were based on false accounts and twisted evidence.

The loneliness of Jesus is on extraordinary display in Mark's passion as we hear the extraordinary sentence that follows Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, "All of them deserted him and fled."

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I believe that if Jesus came among us today, we would kill him again.

We live in that same old broken world that killed our gentle Jesus. We live in a world in which a plague still ravages us and where mass shooters wreak havoc in communities.

The chaos of the world that took the life of Jesus is too much for us to bear at times. It is almost inconceivable to me that this is the second Palm Sunday that we have had in the middle of a pandemic. A year ago on Palm Sunday, I could not have conceived that we would still be fighting this terrible virus. And yet, there are signs of hope for us. For the better part of last year, we had gone to virtual services only, now we are beginning to be vaccinated, we know how to do worship safely, and we will get to gather together this Holy Week and Easter.

In Mark's Passion, in the midst of the darkness of Palm Sunday, even in the gathering gloom that descends over the land when Christ is lifted on the cross, there are glimpses of God's faithfulness, and the joy which lies ahead.

A pagan centurion, maybe even one of those who drove the nails into Jesus' hands or thrust the spear into his side, proclaims with awe, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

Mark tells us, "There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome."

These faithful women care for Jesus and so does Joseph of Aramathea, a dissenting member of the very council which handed Jesus over to Pilate.

"Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body was laid."

The stage is set and the seeds of resurrection have been planted.

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I have no doubt that if Jesus came among us today, he would willingly give his life for us again.

We who are frail, mortal, and imperfect are given the unearned gift of God's perfect love each day. We who have been through so much over this last year, are given the eternal assurance that there is nothing that can happen in this old world that can separate us from the Love of God. Today is the Sunday of the Passion, from the original Latin--the Sunday of suffering-- and yet the word "compassion" when you trace its etymology to the original Latin, means to "suffer with". Jesus suffers with us in this old world and leads us through suffering into a promised future.

"Weeping may spend the night, but joy comes in the morning." Amen.