

- You can't help someone until that person really wants help. I think they told us that in seminary, I think somebody told us. As I remember, they told us that, you can't help someone until that person really wants help. They said it to us with particular reference to the treatment of alcoholics. "You can't help them until they want help." Thus I felt a bit guilty when I conspired with her husband physically to bundle her up one Sunday afternoon, push her into the backseat of an automobile. I held her there while he drove, to the alcohol treatment center for a month of residential therapy. When she was at last sedated, resting in her room, I confessed to the experienced addiction treatment counselor that I felt a little guilty, because like they say, "You really can't help anybody until that person wants to be helped." The counselor responded, "That's dumb." I said, "Really?" She said, "Yeah. I'd have to worry about anybody who would want this kind of help." She said, "This month, we're going to put her through hell. We're going to make her look at her life, we're going to make her stare all of her demons in the face, we're going to make her go through that. You'd kind of have to worry about somebody who would want that." She said, "No, most of our people come here because somebody makes them come. A wife says, 'I love you so much. I'm not going to stay married to you unless you do something about your habit.' Or the boss calls you in and says, 'Hey, you've got to get help or you're fired.' That's the way we get our people." Then she said, "You know, if you ever get somebody who knows that he needs help, and he wants help, he doesn't need help." Let's be honest, there is something comforting in the old, you can't help people until they want help. Because that lets the rest of us off the hook. When you're having trouble, when you're caught in some web of pain, it's a lot easier for me to sit back and say, "Well, um, she knows my office hours. When she wants help, she'll come and get it, because after all, you can't help people until they want help." That way, your help is never my responsibility. As a pastor, how often have I heard people justify their inattentiveness to somebody's need, by saying, (coughs quietly) "No, I didn't visit her after her husband's death, because I didn't know what to say. And after all, she knows where I am, and you can't help them until they need help." (coughs loudly) I remember the mother, who in noting how few church people had made contact with her since her dear daughter's death. She said, "You know, I don't blame them. Because it takes a lot of courage for somebody to enter pain as deep as mine." Courage. And sometimes, hurting people keep their would-be saviors at a distance, by saying things like, "Have you been through what I've been through? Well then you don't know what I'm going through." There's a lot of reasons to hold back. And that's how some people picture God. In Rabbi Kushner's popular book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, that's the God we get. Kushner says, "We have a sympathetic, at times even empathetic God. Who, like Bill Clinton during an election, feels our pain. However, like Bill Clinton after an election, God can't do much about it." The world has been set-up by God into certain immutable laws. And God doesn't want to go breaking a law to help anybody. God cannot disrupt things by getting personally involved. Certainly not by breaking any rules. And when the law of nature comes crashing down upon your head, God, while deeply regretting this, cannot get too implicated. God says, "You know my office hours. If you want to see me, come to church at 11:00. Who gave you my home phone number, anyway?" In friend Reynolds Price's book, *Letter To A Man In The Fire: Does God Exist And Does God Care*, Reynolds says, "We've just got to get out of our heads the pious notion that God is involved in everything that happens in the world. Because there's just too much world, and there's too little

God for God to be blessed or blamed, every time something happens that causes us concern." Unfortunately, neither of these depictions of God, as a serene, detached, uninvolved clock maker match up with the God we get today, Palm Passion Sunday. Today's story in Scripture you will note, is of a parade. A parade that enters into Jerusalem with Jesus at the head. Today, Jesus intrudes into Jerusalem. Oh, he could have stayed away. Earlier, when he would say, "I've got to go up to Jerusalem," his disciples would say, "Don't go there." They knew, Jerusalem would be the place of his death. Jerusalem was where the enemies were. And yet, it is said that Jesus set his face like flint toward the capital. And what do you do with that God? Or maybe more to the point, what does that God do with you? Christmas, my family gave me a lovely statue of the Buddha. Serene, it's done in the style of the elegant Buddhas of Siam. It is Buddha, seated on a lotus blossom with hands raised out in the Dharmachakra Mudra gesture of peacefulness and serenity and openness. Buddha with eyes closed, sign of peace. Jesus is not seated on a lotus blossom. He is bouncing this day on the back of a borrowed burro. Moving, he's moving toward the city where by the end of this week he will face betrayal and torture and death. That's why we also call this Sunday Passion Sunday. It's from the Latin meaning, to suffer. That is where he resolutely rides, and that is how he will eventually die. Our choir hales him as he passes, "Ride on, King Jesus, ride." Scholar Marcus Borg has taken Jesus, and the Buddha, and laid them alongside one another, and has marveled at how many things Buddha said that are uncannily like what Jesus said. Well alas, with such belated efforts to contain or confuse Jesus, this Savior is remarkable not only for what he said, but also for what he did, and for how he died. Today, Jesus intrudes. Earlier in his ministry, Jesus said, "Come to me, all ye who are burdened and heavy laden." Today, he comes to us, bouncing on the back of a donkey. He is surrounded by a throng, some of whom wish him well, others want him ill. Some of the crowd, little children, wave palm branches in welcome. Others seek to set wheels in motion, whereby Jesus will finally be shut up. And that is the seething human cauldron into which Jesus rides. We're members of the modern world, and the modern world, in order to make itself work, first needed somehow to do something to pacify God. We couldn't move ahead with modern plans for human betterment, without the assistance of Deistic philosophers, who made a careful distinction between what they called particular providence, and general providence. It is the glory of God, said the Deists, that God doesn't need to get involved in the grubby little particulars of the world to make the world work. God is in his heaven, and that leaves us free to run the world as we please. And the twentieth century is the result. What kind of God is this though, who would leave us to our own devices? A sophomore said, "A good professor will get in your face. Poor teachers sit back. They come in, you know, they lay out all this stuff on the table, and they say, "Come on in if you want to, and take what you want, leave what you like." A good teacher, dares to get with you. There are just too many defenses against learning and thinking. There are too many reasons for faculty self-protection, that lead many to say, "Well you know what they say, you just can't teach anybody until that person really wants to be taught." Let me tell you, if we waited around here for people until they really wanted, nobody would get taught anything. A prominent management theorist, speaking on campus awhile back said, "One of the essential characteristics for a good leader in business, is courage to push against the organizational defenses." "Good leaders," he said, "Have the courage to be interventionists. In dying organizations, there's always some leader who won't lead, who merely manages what's already going on." The good leader is the interventionist. On most Sundays in this chapel, (clears throat) we say the Apostles Creed. And when we say the Apostles Creed, we say Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, he suffered under Pontius Pilate, he was crucified and then he died and was buried. You know, (clears throat) in the Apostles Creed, it's all in the passive tense. Which, if I remember correctly in my Junior English

Composition class, Miss Amber Bogs said, "Is a sign of syntactical weakness." "Boys and girls, use the active voice," she said. You see, even the creed renders Jesus into this sort of divine automaton who passively is brought on the scene, passively born, passively suffers, passively dies. Well not today. The beginning of this story today, Genesis first book of the Bible, God speaking into the silence, God laying hold of the void, God said, "Let there be light, and there was." And then the ending of the story, in the book of Revelation, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with humanity. And God will be with them, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more." People, something's afoot. I'm sorry if you thought we had God all tucked safely to bed. This God is on the move. God is not hunkered down here at church, God is now invading the city, God is taking back what God owns. A student said to me the other day, I asked him, "What are you majoring in here at Duke?" And he said, "History." And I said, "Well that's a tough major, a lot of challenging courses, majoring in history." He said, "Well, you know the hardest thing in history is before you can major in it, you first have to try to be an atheist." I said, "What?" Oh that's right, yeah, I almost forgot, we can't have God intruding into exclusively human events. We've got to explain all human history as self-made. Our lives are exclusively self-derived. Everything comes from the inside, from the tug and pull of human events. We can't have history told like the Bible tries it. History is these insistent incursions of a God that just won't let us be. Some plan put forth first in the mind of God. Oh no, now it's up to us to make history go right, or history won't go right. Sorry, History Department, look, here he comes. Not necessarily to fix what's wrong with the world, but to reclaim the world. Sometimes he just bears what's wrong, shoulders it, takes it up with us, he stands beside us. The crucifixion that awaits him at the end of this week was a death chosen not just for Jesus. Crucifixion was the typical Roman, imperial, political way to deal with Jews who got too big for their britches, and said things and did things that caused Caesar trouble. Thousands of Jews were tortured to death in this way. And this is the fate that Jesus willingly took upon his back. He could have bypassed Jerusalem. He could have died a pleasant end in some nursing home somewhere. No! He couldn't have been the kind of God he is. Behold, Jesus is on the move. He will ride, he will encroach, he will with whip in hand, cleanse our corrupted temples. He is going to make people in power very mad before the end of the week, both political and religious. He is going to unmask our deceit. He is going to evoke the violence upon which our culture is based. It will come down in full force upon his naked back. He is going to hang there and bleed and gasp his last. All for us and for our salvation. All for us. Ride on, King!