



THE PASSION PLAY

Living the Story of Christ's Last Days

Inspired by the Oberammergau Passionsspiele



ROB FUQUAY



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Chapter 1

THE POWER OF A VOW

The plague did end in Oberammergau and many were spared, which should please anyone who honestly believes in the power of a vow.

From the 1984 Passion Play Guidebook

My life is defined by vows.

My parents stood at the altar of a Presbyterian church in Hamilton, Ohio, on June 15, 1957, and exchanged vows with the solemn pledge, “I do.” That was a defining moment for me since I was born nearly six years later. Soon after my birth they presented me for baptism at the altar of a Methodist church in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and vowed to nurture me in the Christian faith and raise me in the church. That vow led to my own decision fifteen years later to stand at the altar of another Methodist congregation and accept Christ as my Savior and become a full member of the church. Eleven years later, I knelt at another altar as my bishop laid hands on my head while saying, “Take thou authority to

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preach the word,” and I was ordained a United Methodist minister.

Within two years I would find myself standing at an altar in Dallas, Texas, vowing to take Susan as my wife. We presented all three of our daughters at altars for baptism and when they became teenagers, I laid my hands on each of their heads and confirmed them into the church.

As you can tell, altars and vows are a big part of my story. How big a part have they played in your story? How far back can you trace your family history and identify the people and the vows that determined that history? Are there moments in your family background when someone vowed to leave their home and travel to another country or region, and that is why you grew up where you did? Were there moments when someone vowed to adopt a faith or way of living that greatly impacted your life?

All of us have probably been defined by vows more than we know, but imagine growing up in a town where everyone who lives there has been shaped by the same vow made nearly four hundred years earlier. That is life in Oberammergau.

Every first year of a new decade, this sleepy little mountain village morphs into a production venue that welcomes the world to experience the *Passionsspiele*. The play, which lasts about six hours with a meal break in the middle, is performed more than one hundred times between mid-May and early October. Oberammergau has roughly five thousand residents. The theatre where the Passion Play is performed seats five thousand. In a performance year, Oberammergau welcomes more than a half-million people from all over the world.

The cast is made up of all ages of townspeople from babies to senior adults. To be in the cast, someone must have been

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born in Oberammergau or lived there at least twenty years. (However, this requirement is reduced to ten years if you married a native Oberammergauer.) Along with technicians, stagehands, costume and prop designers, it takes more than two thousand people to put on the play, or about 40 percent of the town's population. Even those without a direct role in the production share in the town's ability to carry off the large-scale performance. Every hotel is full. People serve as shuttle bus drivers and tour guides. All of the restaurants combined cannot accommodate the crowds during the meal break, so residents open their homes. It truly takes a village to put on the Passion Play in Oberammergau.

Why has this community gone to such effort for nearly four centuries? Because of a vow. By late 1633, eighty-four members of the town had died from the plague, a sizable percentage considering the population was about six hundred at the time. A meeting was called in the parish church for all citizens. They prayed before the crucifix that can still be seen in the church. They made the following vow: "Every ten years the devout representation of the sufferings and death of Christ should be given, so that God would have mercy and free our village from the appalling sickness."

The next year, in 1634, Oberammergau put on its first Passion Play on Pentecost Sunday on a stage in the cemetery built over the graves of the loved ones who had died in the plague.¹ Today the Oberammergau Passion Play is the longest running in the world and the only one that originated from a vow.²

The decision to honor God with a passion play versus building a chapel or monument is not unusual considering the times. Passion plays were popular throughout Europe and

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were a common way for a community to express its faith and devotion. The decision to offer the play just once a decade may reflect the size of production the people envisioned. This is just speculation, though, since we can't say for sure why the people chose what they did. What we do know is that the residents in Oberammergau today understand that the tradition started because their ancestors pleaded with God to spare them further deaths from the plague. There were no more deaths as a result of the disease after that prayer service.

Reflect for a moment on any times you have made similar vows to God. Have you ever been in a situation where you prayed, "God, if you'll get me out of this, I'll do anything for you"? We can all probably think of foolish predicaments where we made promises to God. I remember being at an amusement park when my kids were small. There was a roller coaster called "Kracken," which I assumed got its name because of the way your back feels after riding it. It didn't just go up and down; it went upside down and did corkscrews and flips all while dangling your body in the air. Halfway through the torture I prayed if God would let me survive without upchucking on everyone sitting behind me, I would never get on another roller coaster again. God came through.

Our vows can be trite if not downright selfish, and the less serious the situation, the less serious we are about keeping our promise. It's like the story of the man looking for a parking space. He prayed, "God, if you will open up a spot near the front I'll start going to church." Just then a car backed out of the very first space. He pulled in and said, "Don't worry, Lord, I just found one."

Sometimes our vows and follow-through are trivial. Once we have life under control on our terms, we don't need God's

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help. But then there are other times, times when the chances of our getting control are nonexistent. The medical results show you might have a potentially fatal disease. Your child faces a life-threatening surgery. Your spouse leaves you. Your job has been eliminated. An intruder points a gun at you.

For many of us, we don't make God all we need until God is all we've got. The people of Oberammergau turned to God because God was all they had. Without a miraculous intervention, they saw no hope for the future. Therefore, they made a vow, if God would spare them, they would honor God with a decennial passion play. Since God came through, now it was the people's turn.

Bargaining with God?

Some find this part of the Oberammergau story troubling. The vow feels like a bargain with God. If God does something for them, they will do something for God. Genuine faith, goes the argument, means putting God first without conditions. Is a vow, like the one the people in Oberammergau made, a true sign of faith or simply an attempt to bribe God into acting on our behalf?

Let's consider two examples from the Old Testament. The first is Jacob, someone who knew a lot about trickery. He tricked his desperately hungry twin brother, Esau, into giving up his birthright for food Jacob had prepared. Some might say Jacob wasn't being underhanded, just smart. If his brother was willing to forgo his birthright for something of much lesser value, why should Jacob be blamed for obliging him?

On another occasion, however, Jacob was much more devious. Knowing his father, Isaac, didn't have long to live and his eyesight was failing, Jacob dressed up to appear and

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even smell like his brother in order to trick Isaac into giving him Esau's blessing. Now Jacob may have been prompted by his mother, but his decision to comply serves as a reminder that all of us are responsible for our choices. We begin to see how telling Jacob's own birth was; he came into the world clutching the heel of his brother, symbolic of his attempt to grab everything his brother would one day have.

Jacob's actions caught up to him when Esau decided to take revenge. Fearing for his life his mother insisted Jacob travel to her homeland some distance away. En route, he stopped at a place he named Bethel to spend the night. In a dream he saw angels ascending and descending a ladder from heaven. God spoke to Jacob and informed him of the covenant sworn to his grandfather, Abraham, and father, Isaac. Jacob would continue that same promise to establish a great nation that would be holy to God. They would possess the land and be greatly blessed and bless the nations of the world.

When Jacob woke up, he built an altar and made this vow:

If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you.

Genesis 28:20-22

Does that feel a little conditional to you? Okay, maybe a lot conditional!

The second example is a woman named Hannah who lived roughly seven hundred years after Jacob. She wasn't on the run from anybody, but she had a difficult life since she was unable to have a child. However, she remained faithful to God.

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One day while praying in the sanctuary in Shiloh she made a vow:

O LORD of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head.

1 Samuel 1:11

Now perhaps Hannah's vow is less aggrandizing than Jacob's. After all, she wasn't just vowing to give a tenth of her income but her very own son. She pledged that he would be devoted completely to serve in the temple and be raised by the priest. Even so, on the surface, both vows come off as attempts to bargain with God. They have a quid pro quo quality about them. "Do *this* for me, God, and I'll do *that* for you." Of course, it's preposterous to think we have anything God so desperately needs that we can force God to act on our behalf. When it comes to our relationship with God, we are the needy ones. So how are we to understand these vows?

Typically, when we bargain, we bring something to the table. We bring what we hope someone else wants so we can get what we need. However, in both of these instances Jacob and Hannah possessed little material wealth. In fact, their "bargain" was what they would do with the blessing they hoped God would provide. They recognized what such a blessing would do for them personally: to provide material help in Jacob's case and to provide a child in Hannah's, but rather than being a bargain their vows were a declaration of obedience. If God should so favor them, they would be faithful in their response. They were simply promising to honor

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God in advance, which is a powerful thing provided we come through on our end. And vows are not simply the province of Old Testament times; we see Paul completing a vow by cutting his hair in Acts 18:18.

When I was a pastor in North Carolina I was privileged to serve on the board of the Reynolds Program in Church Leadership. This program provided top quality leadership development for clergy comparable to the kinds of training top companies provide their executives. It was named for the benefactor, Royce Reynolds, who donated the funds to launch the program. Royce sold cars all of his career. By the end of it he owned more than a dozen dealerships in Greensboro, North Carolina. He used his wealth to start not only programs like this one but also many others that benefited local churches, various charities, global mission agencies, and his own congregation.

Royce did not come from a wealthy background, which is exactly why he became so generous. He grew up “dirt poor,” as he says, in rural Alabama. Early in his marriage and career, he was struggling to make ends meet. One day as he was walking down a road, he fell to his knees and prayed. He told the Lord he needed a spiritual partner who would share in his success and vowed to give ten percent of everything he made.

Soon after, his sales job really picked up. He took a check for a tithe of his income to give to the pastor of his church. The pastor, who knew Royce’s financial condition, asked if he could afford to give that much. Royce said, “I told him he didn’t understand. I have to pay off my partner. That is his share. That is how my stewardship began.”³

Later he moved to North Carolina and bought his own

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struggling Pontiac dealership that took off and allowed him to open numerous other dealerships. All along the way he was true to his promise. He gave generously to God. Royce has given away millions of dollars in his life and credits God for everything. He cites the vow he made as a young man at the start of his career. He didn't bargain with God. He just made God a promise of what he would do if God should bless him.

Isn't that what a vow is after all—promising what we will do in advance?

I believe this is what the people in Oberammergau did in 1633. Were they desperate? Absolutely. They lost nearly one in seven people to the plague. Were they devout? Their history of celebrating holy occasions was evidence, but so was their surrender to God in crisis. Clearly, they had more than a fair-weather faith. But their most important characteristic was their seriousness. They made a vow they had no possibility of fulfilling unless God intervened. Without God's answer to their prayer they had no future with which to carry out the promise of performing a passion play for generations to come. They were completely serious about giving to God what only God could give to them.

Never Forget

One curiosity about the vow is just when it was made. Records from the actual period are scant. Priests typically were the historians in small villages and consistency of record keeping varied from priest to priest. Archives show that the deaths of people from the plague ranged from November 1632 to July 1633, but the traditional date given the vow is October 28, 1633, a full three months after the last recorded

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death. The longest period between deaths up to that point was no more than a few weeks. It seems odd that they would have waited three months with no reported fatalities after eight straight months of funerals before calling for a prayer service.

One explanation might simply be inaccuracy in the dates. Perhaps the vow occurred in July. Some historians look at various references to prove that is more likely. However, another possibility is that the October date might not have been the only prayer meeting of the people. They may have gathered in July to pray for relief and discuss what they would do as a community if God answered their prayer. Some months later, in October, realizing God had answered their prayers, they returned to officially vow their dedication to carry out this promise.

Whether or not that is true, this possibility points out a truth. We recognize God's active hand with the perspective of time and distance. Sometimes we sense God's movement in the present, but very often we understand God's involvement in retrospect. As my preaching professor in seminary, Dr. Fred Craddock, used to say, faith is less about a blind trust in an unknown future as it is a claim that God has been working in our known past. Recognizing that favorable turns of events, good fortune, and coincidences are actually God's blessing is an act of faith. I can imagine some villager in Oberammergau who was present when the people prayed in a crisis saying later, "Remember when we prayed that night? Well, God came through! God has spared us! We must now follow through on our vow."

Can you remember any past experiences when you prayed for God to get you through a tough situation, and now, with

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time and distance, you can see that God acted? Have you ever been tempted to forget promises you made to God in a crisis once the crisis was averted? If so, know that these are not salvation issues. God doesn't bar us from heaven because we didn't uphold a pledge we made. However, I do like the idea that it's never too late to be faithful.

The Power of a Vow Fulfilled

Let's think about the power of fulfilling vows by distinguishing between vows and oaths. Oaths typically involve affairs of this world. Citizens swear an oath of allegiance. Doctors pledge the Hippocratic oath. Judges pledge an oath to administer justice. Presidents and government officials take an oath of office. Sometimes oaths are between two people promising to fulfill a pledge to each other.

Vows, on the other hand, involve God. Vows may be between two people, such as a marriage vow, but God is involved in the promise they make. Keeping a vow is a holy obedience. With this in mind, consider a few implications of maintaining a vow.

Keeping a Vow Is a Response, Not a Prerequisite, to Grace

Since the beginning of my ministry, every fall I have led stewardship campaigns in the churches I serve. This provides an annual opportunity to renew our membership vows to support the church through our "prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness." The campaign always ends with a Pledge Commitment Sunday when we will fill out cards pledging our support for the year ahead.

Inevitably there are people who don't pledge for fear of not living up to their commitment. Particularly when it comes

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to their financial support, they say, “What if my job changes and my income goes down? What if I have an emergency and can’t fulfill my pledge? A vow to God is a serious thing, so I don’t pledge. I will be faithful with what I have.”

In many ways that is understandable and commendable. It reflects a serious attitude about vows. But what would it mean if we stood at the altar and said the same to our spouse? “I will be faithful with what I have. I’ll do my best.” Perhaps the end result still means the same, but how much more powerful is it to hear from someone you love, “I do. I will!”

God doesn’t expect us to be faithful beyond our means. As Paul said, “God will accept your gift on the basis of what you have, not on what you don’t have” (2 Corinthians 8:12 GNT). Not pledging to God for fear of repercussion if we miss a payment turns God into little more than a loan officer. The fact is, God doesn’t loan to us. God gives freely. Our vows to God are responses to God’s blessing, not prerequisites for receiving.

When we make a vow, it comes out of love and gratitude for all God has done. We aren’t earning brownie points with God. We aren’t bargaining for future reward. We vow because we realize that without God, we would not have anything to vow in the first place.

Some residents in Oberammergau today are descendants of original cast members in the *Passionsspiele* of 1634. Had those loved ones died in the plague these descendants wouldn’t be here today. God’s answer to the prayers of their ancestors means they have a reason and opportunity to keep that tradition going.

What are reasons you have to make vows to God? Are there miraculous events in your history without which you

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wouldn't be here today? Our vows are always responses to God's grace.

A Vow Gives Us Something to Live Up To

In part 1 of The Lord of the Rings trilogy, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Frodo recognizes the risk he has brought to those who have promised to travel with him to destroy the ring on Mount Doom. He decides to go alone. He gets into a boat and begins crossing a lake when his friend Sam reaches the shore and begs Frodo to come back. When he doesn't, Sam jumps into the water even though he can't swim. He goes under and is about to drown when Frodo yanks him up and into the boat. Sam looks up at him and says, "I made a promise, Mr. Frodo. A promise! 'Don't you leave him, Samwise Gamgee.' And I don't mean to! I don't mean to!"⁴

That scene still gets me. A promise, like a vow, is a powerful thing. A promise can cause us to do things we never would have otherwise. A promise brings something out of us, something good and big and demanding. A promise like that gives us a reason to live.

Psychiatrist Viktor Frankl observed this in a Nazi concentration camp. The prisoners who survived were ones who found a reason to live, whether it was helping other inmates or getting back to a cause that consumed them before they were imprisoned. For Frankl, his reason to live became taking what he observed and learned in the camp to benefit others in the future.

There is something about a vow that imbeds a sense of *why* within us. A woman I knew in a previous church I served didn't go through with a plan to take her life because of a promise she made. A failed marriage and a gambling addiction

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had robbed her of hope. She decided to take her life, but the one thing that kept her from pulling the trigger of a pistol was remembering a promise she made to her niece to visit her church with her. She laid down the pistol until she at least fulfilled that promise. What she didn't factor into her thinking was the injection of hope she would find as she kept her promise. She sat through the first Sunday with tears in her eyes feeling that God was speaking directly to her. She returned for a second week and before long she made the decision to keep living. Today she is a happy woman who has found love and joy again in her life. This story brings us hope that even those whose desperation leads them downward may find their way to the surface.

What vows have you made that give you a reason to live? Who in your life depends on you? You never know when a promise we have no desire to keep will be the very thing God uses to give us a new future.

Our Vows Are Bigger Than Us

One final thought as we close this first chapter. Our vows to God impact more than just our own lives. Our middle daughter, Sarah, is the director of Project Transformation Indianapolis, a literacy development program helping at-risk children. I attended the celebration event at the end of her pilot year. Kids spoke and sang about what the program meant to them.

Someone came up behind me and said, "You have to feel good seeing what you've been a part of." I quickly said, "Oh no, I can't take any credit. This is the work of my daughter and her team." The person said, "Hear me out. You and Susan made a vow at an altar and as a result your daughter was born.

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Plus, you vowed to raise and nurture her in the faith when she was baptized. Don't you think God used that nurturing to guide her to do what she's doing?" I still wasn't prepared to take any credit, but there was an idea in this person's words I couldn't debate. God takes our vows and does more with them than we can know or sometimes foresee.

When the villagers of Oberammergau made a vow in 1633, they were most likely thinking of their own commitment. Surely, they had no way of knowing how a prayer meeting one night would shape the lives of generations to come. Vows have that kind of power. God uses the promises people make to impact others far beyond the knowing and even intention of the promise-makers.

Victor Hugo described this most powerfully in the main character of *Les Misérables*. Jean Valjean was a released convict in eighteenth-century France. Turned away by people, he ends up in the home of a bishop who gives him supper and a warm bed. During the night Valjean awakens and decides to steal the bishop's silver forks and knives, but the next day he is caught and brought back to the bishop.

Shocking to everyone, but especially Jean Valjean, the bishop gladly greets him, explaining that he forgot the silver candlesticks. "Do not forget, never forget, that you have promised to use this money in becoming an honest man . . . Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I buy from you; I withdraw it from black thoughts and perdition, and I give it to God."⁵

Valjean eventually settles in a distant community and assumes a new name. His generosity and sacrifices earn him the reputation of being a saint. He eventually takes in a young girl whose mother has died and adopts the girl as his own

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daughter. Valjean never remembered actually promising to use the bishop's gifts to be an honest man, but along the way he chose to make the promise his own, and many lives were the better for it. Hugo writes the story not because it actually happened but to inspire what can happen when we see our life as defined by a vow.

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Recognize your place in the passion of Jesus.

Perfect for Lent, this study takes you on a journey to the origins of the Passion Play and helps you understand how the play has been used both as a ritual of praise and, later, as a weapon. The play covers the final period of Jesus' life from his visit to Jerusalem to the journey to the cross. The book and study help readers and small groups feel a sense of connection to the play while recognizing their own place in the story of Jesus.

"Through the 386-year-old Oberammergau Passion Play, Rob Fuquay inspires us to claim the story of Christ's love as our own. The ritual and continuous adaptation of the Passion Play is a testimony to the power of the cross to evoke personal transformation, solidarity with those who suffer, and a peace that passes all understanding."

—**Bishop Laurie Haller**, Resident Bishop of the Iowa Area in the North Central Jurisdiction of The United Methodist Church

"Rob Fuquay has done a masterful job of using the history and stories of the Oberammergau Passion Play to encourage people to remember the Passion in a new way, grow in their personal walk with Jesus Christ, and live the unique life meant for each of us. I am happy that people will learn more about the Oberammergau tradition while being inspired to be changed by the passion of Jesus Christ."

—**James E. Ridgway Jr.**, CEO—Educational Opportunities Tours

"What a clever and profound idea: to bring the famous Oberammergau Passion Play to all of us. With Rob Fuquay, you are there. This book gifts us with the possibility of a city and our lives being transformed by the reenactment of Christ's last days in our time and place."

—**Dr. James C. Howell**, Senior Pastor, Myers Park UMC



Rob Fuquay is the senior pastor of St. Luke's United Methodist Church in Indianapolis. He has served various congregations with his gifts of strong preaching, leadership development, and visioning. Rob is the author of *A New Reformation* and *The God We Can Know*, a 7-week study designed for the entire congregation to explore the "I Am" sayings of Jesus found in the Gospel of John. He is also the author of *Which Way, Lord* on how to discern and follow God's leading.

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