

Epworth Chapel on the Green
April 14, 2019
Palm/Passion Sunday
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 50:4-9
Psalm 22:1-11
Philippians 2:5-11
Luke 22:39-23:56

We find ourselves once again very deep into our Lenten journey and entering into Passiontide. It is Palm Sunday. This is the only day of the year when we read the entire Passion narrative together. Whether we are young or old, all of us are caught up in this story.

This story speaks to us because it is the *truly human* drama. We can identify with its characters, its plot twists, and the emotional “back and forth” that it reveals. Who among us has not experienced betrayal, fear, and humiliation? Who among us has not experienced powerlessness, and malice from others? Most of us know what it feels like to be misrepresented and misunderstood.

The Passion story is not just a theological narrative. This story is *our story*, full of life truths that no one has to teach us.

For starters, look with me at the isolation that Jesus faces in his last days and hours. When you look closely at the various scenes in the Passion story, you see how increasingly *isolated* Jesus becomes, even though he is surrounded by many people.

At the Last Supper, even though Jesus tells his disciples that he “eagerly has desired to eat the Passover meal with them before he suffers,” they are so unfocused and self-centered that an argument breaks out among them about which of them should be regarded as the greatest.

Jesus is aware of this, of course. When Peter vows that he is ready to die with the Lord, Jesus warns him that before the morning comes Peter will deny three times that he even knows Jesus!

And it’s not just Peter. The disciples completely misunderstand Jesus’ instructions to them about preparing themselves to carry on his mission, and to be ready for an arduous spiritual battle. They think he wants them to take up arms and fight for him with swords.

And then, to make matters worse, as he pours out his heart in agony to the Father on the Mount of Olives, his “friends” cannot even stay awake with him.

His isolation continues as he is betrayed by one of his own. A kiss that should have meant friendship meant death instead. And when Jesus has to carry his cross to the place of the Skull, who is it that is recruited to help him? Not one of his disciples. They are nowhere to be found. Instead, it is Simon of Cyrene – a stranger – who is forced to perform this gruesome task.

As he makes his way toward his death, Jesus experiences the kind of isolation that most of us will never know. And we know from other Gospel accounts and from Psalm 22 that he feels utterly forsaken.

But in addition to the isolation Jesus faces, the story also shows us from the testimony of many different sources that Jesus was *innocent* of any crime. He is the first to confess it. And then when Pilate interrogates him, Pilate says: “I find him guilty of no crime.” Herod, too, acquits him.

Even in his dying moments, one of the criminals hanging next to him recognizes that “This man has done nothing wrong.” And finally, a Roman soldier who witnessed Jesus’ death proclaims, “This man is innocent beyond doubt.”

In his last hours, the Son of God, the Son of perfect justice, becomes the willing victim of supreme injustice.

The irony in this whole drama is striking. The story is full of words and events that seem to mean one thing, but actually mean something else.

We see the crowd gathered before Pilate clamoring for Barabbas, a rebel murderer, to be freed instead of Jesus. The name Barabbas means “son of the father.” So, at the crowd’s insistence, the guilty “son of the father” is set free by the divine Son of the Father, an ironic playing out of the meaning of the Crucifixion.

And then there is Herod, the *usurper* king of the Jews, mocking Jesus and dressing him in an elegant robe such as would be worn by Herod and his ilk.

In addition, consider the soldiers who mock Jesus and write the inscription above his Cross, “The King of the Jews.” In doing so, they actually present Jesus to the world as he *truly* is – the true King over a kingdom that can only be gained through humility and suffering love. While those with power all ridicule this King, only a dying criminal can see the truth. He says to Jesus: “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Isolation, innocence, and irony. During this next week, the world will carry on “business as usual.” It will go about its business, oblivious to the wonder and glory of its own re-creation. And the Cross of Jesus is the sign, the vehicle, through which all of this happens.

The world will not see it. We can easily miss it, too, unless our hearts and minds are quiet and prepared. In case we need a little assistance, perhaps these words will help:

He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom [we] hid our faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows...All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth. Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, so he opened not his mouth. [Is. 53:3ff.]

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.