

Sermon: Reflection on Matthew's Account of the Passion

Year A, Palm Sunday

Palms: [Psalm 118:1-2,19-29](#); [Matthew 21:1-11](#)

Passion: [Isaiah 50:4-9a](#); [Psalm 31:9-16](#); [Philippians 2:5-11](#); [Matthew 26:14-27:66](#)

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[When we think of Jesus' arrest, trial and execution, we often think of a blend of the accounts coming from the four Gospels. Yet each Gospel tells its own story. To hear just one, read from beginning to end, allows us to connect more intimately with that particular account, with that particular witness. Let us listen now to Matthew's account of the death of Jesus of Nazareth.]

Judas Agrees to Betray Jesus

Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, 'What will you give me if I betray him to you?' They paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

The Passover with the Disciples

On the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, 'Where do you want us to make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?' He said, 'Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, "The Teacher says, My time is near; I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples."' So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover meal.

When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve; and while they were eating, he said, 'Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.' And they became greatly distressed and began to say to him one after another, 'Surely not I, Lord?' He answered, 'The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.' Judas, who betrayed him, said, 'Surely not I, Rabbi?' He replied, 'You have said so.'

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.'

When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Then Jesus said to them, 'You will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written,

"I will strike the shepherd,

and the sheep of the flock will be scattered."

But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.' Peter said to him, 'Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you.' Jesus said to him, 'Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.' Peter said to him, 'Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.' And so said all the disciples.

Think of how we are wired as living creatures. Every day we need to eat and need to sleep. And if we ignore those needs, our body sends out increasingly urgent signals that we need to take of it.

By tying this ritual of remembering Jesus to that inescapable cycle, Jesus is reminding us of our relationship with him. Every day.

And as wired as we are to eat and sleep, we are also wired to forget. We need to forget most of what we see and hear every day just to stay sane. Our bodies use our time asleep to consolidate our memories and to discard the heaps of impressions we can't use.

And even though we need it, even though we long for it, daily we forget our relationship with Jesus. We glaze over the children killed in a gas attack in Syria, we choose not to see the opioid addictions around us, we let someone else worry about global warming.

Every day the cock crows and we have betrayed Jesus. He knows we will. Not because we want to, but because we are fragile, sinful creatures. So he has given us another mechanism to reconnect with him, with our own intentions. Every bite, every sip, can remind us of our connection to him. And to one another, so we can help each other stay in loving relationship with each other and with him for just a tiny bit longer before we sleep and the cock crows again.

Jesus Prays in Gethsemane

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane [*Geth-sem 'a-ne*]; and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I go over there and pray.' He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee [*Zeb 'e-dee*], and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.' And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.' Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, 'So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.' Again he went away for the second time and prayed, 'My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.' Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words. Then he came to the disciples and said to them, 'Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.'

While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, 'The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him.' At once he came up to Jesus and said, 'Greetings, Rabbi!' and kissed him. Jesus said to him, 'Friend, do what you are here to do.' Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him. Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, 'Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?' At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, 'Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But all this has taken place, so that the scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled.' Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.

Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas [*Kye 'a-fass*] the high priest, in whose house the scribes and the elders had gathered. But Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest; and going inside, he sat with the guards in order to see how this

would end. Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for false testimony against Jesus so that they might put him to death, but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward and said, ‘This fellow said, “I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days.”’ The high priest stood up and said, ‘Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?’ But Jesus was silent. Then the high priest said to him, ‘I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.’ Jesus said to him, ‘You have said so. But I tell you, From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.’

Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, ‘He has blasphemed! Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your verdict?’ They answered, ‘He deserves death.’ Then they spat in his face and struck him; and some slapped him, saying, ‘Prophesy [*prophes-eye*] to us, you Messiah! Who is it that struck you?’

Every community can tolerate a certain amount of stress. But when the stress rises too high, it has to be released. If there’s a specific, actionable source of the stress, like a factory polluting the water supply, the community can often pull together and address the issue. But what if there isn’t something specific? Or what if it can’t be addressed? If the community can’t find healthy ways to address what it’s stressing it, there is a fallback method to calm everyone down.

We seem to have a mechanism built into us, where we find someone to blame. We pin all the problems of the community on a single individual, preferably someone without much power. We get that person out of the community, maybe by shunning them, maybe by killing them. The act of coming together, picking a scapegoat and then banishing them releases the stress. For a while. Until the stress rises again. Because the underlying cause of the stress has not been addressed. But for a while, the previous scapegoat is forgotten and the tension is released.

Think about high school. You either scapegoated someone or were scapegoated. I did both. Think about our national political environment where we are so polarized and we can’t even agree on a scapegoat, it’s Obama, it’s Trump, unless it’s the Muslims or the immigrants or the LGBTQ community. Whatever it is, let’s pin the blame there, so we can save ourselves the trouble of dealing with thorny complex problems like climate change or income inequality or the impact of global economic change. By all means, let’s avoid dealing with complicated problems, because to deal with those, we’d have to start listening to each other, have to stay in loving relationship with each other, as flawed and inconsistent individuals.

Peter’s Denial of Jesus

Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. A servant-girl came to him and said, ‘You also were with Jesus the Galilean.’ But he denied it before all of them, saying, ‘I do not know what you are talking about.’ When he went out to the porch, another servant-girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, ‘This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.’ Again he denied it with an oath, ‘I do not know the man.’ After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, ‘Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you.’ Then he began to curse, and he swore an oath, ‘I do not know the man!’ At that moment the cock crowed. Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said: ‘Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.’ And he went out and wept bitterly.

We would all like to think that we would stand up. But most of us have not been tested. And until we stand in that cold courtyard and have someone say we believe in something because of who we hang out with or our accent, we have no real idea what we'd say. We hope we would stand with Jesus, but we have all been in Peter's shoes when the cock crowed.

Jesus Brought before Pilate

When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people conferred together against Jesus in order to bring about his death. They bound him, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate the governor.

[Pause]

The Suicide of Judas

When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. He said, 'I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.' But they said, 'What is that to us? See to it yourself.' Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself. But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, 'It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since they are blood money.' After conferring together, they used them to buy the potter's field as a place to bury foreigners. For this reason that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, 'And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one on whom a price had been set, on whom some of the people of Israel had set a price, and they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord commanded me.'

Pilate Questions Jesus

Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus said, 'You say so.' But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. Then Pilate said to him, 'Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?' But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas [*Ba-rabb'-ass*]. So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, 'Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?' For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. While he was sitting on the judgement seat, his wife sent word to him, 'Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.' Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. The governor again said to them, 'Which of the two do you want me to release for you?' And they said, 'Barabbas.' Pilate said to them, 'Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?' All of them said, 'Let him be crucified!' Then he asked, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Let him be crucified!'

In junior high, back in the late 70s, I was at a school dance when the DJ put on something. Within 15 seconds, no more than that, the entire gym was jumping up and down with the music, shouting, "Disco [stinks]" That's not exactly what we said, but you can imagine. The next day, our health teacher, Miss Brown, lit into us. The DJ had been playing a request. I felt awful for whatever unnamed kid had heard the opening note of the song they wanted to dance to and then found all the refined musical tastes of 7th and 8th graders arrayed against them. How awful must

that have felt. I don't know. But I can tell you how good it felt to jump and shout until the music was abruptly changed.

Scapegoating works. Because it feels good. And it feels better in a crowd. If Caiaphas and Pilate wanted the tension in the city to drop, find scapegoat, rustle up a story based on only vaguely credible facts, alternate facts might work if they move quickly enough, and get a crowd together chanting. If you can get the crowd feeling good, shouting together, and then get them to take all the responsibility for selecting the scapegoat off your shoulders, you're home free. At least for a while.

Pilate Hands Jesus over to Be Crucified

So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.' Then the people as a whole answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children!' So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene [*Sigh-ree* 'ne] named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross. And when they came to a place called Golgotha [*Gol'-goth-a*] (which means Place of a Skull), they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; then they sat down there and kept watch over him. Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.'

Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.' In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, "I am God's Son." ' The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' [*AY-lee AY-lee luh-MAH sah-BAHK-tah-nee*] that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'This man is calling for Elijah.' At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.' Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. Now when the centurion and those with him,

who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'

Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

There nothing heroic in Jesus' death. The redemption comes later. The story of Jesus' death is painful and shameful. If you were trying to keep a movement going that said, "Join us. We're the followers of Jesus of Nazareth." this is not the story to tell. Tell the Sermon on the Mount. Tell the Samaritan Woman at the Well or the Healing of the Man Born Blind. Don't tell this story.

Yet all four Gospels tell this story. And they tell it in the same awful detail. It is personal and particular and specific. There is no way to hear this story and not shudder from the violence. There is no way to hear this story and not recognize this it coming from Syria, Iraq, Chicago, Boston.

We know Jesus was what Caiaphas accused him of being. He was the Messiah, the Son of God. He dreaded what was to come. On the Mount of Olives, he asked that this cup be taken from him. However much he dreaded the violence that his death would entail, it exceeded his expectations to such an extent that he called out to God, "Why hast thou forsaken me?" We know how much power he had to heal and to save, to calm the mighty storms and feed the thousands.

So what is the point of the gruesomeness of this story? Couldn't we get to the same place theologically without all the brutal details? Here's how I come to terms with the story as it was written. I know Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. I know he could have spared himself the pain, violence and humiliation that this death entailed. But I know too that he believed that the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake were blessed. Those blessed people are also the most likely to be scapegoated.

Jesus' death, handed down to us in all its violent brutality, will never allow his followers to fail to see the scapegoat. Jesus' death will never allow the scapegoats to be forgotten or ignored or trivialized as the cost of doing business of being a community. So even though we are a creature built on hungers and forgetting, each bit of bread, each sip we take, reminds us of him, and therefore reminds us of them. Because his death made sure that their persecution could not go unseen and forgotten for all time.

The Burial of Jesus

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea [*Ar'-e-math-eh'-a*], named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, 'Sir, we remember what that impostor said while he was still alive, "After three days I will rise again." Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, "He has been raised from

the dead”, and the last deception would be worse than the first.’ Pilate said to them, ‘You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can.’ So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone.