

3/28/21 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME – PASTOR CALEB

Welcome to worship at Alexanderwohl! We welcome you all who are here in the church building as well as those who are joining us today from home.

We are really witnessing the beauty of Spring, with shoots of new growth coming out of the previously dormant ground. It reminds us of the power of God to bring life and goodness out of what appears to be dead. It is too easy to forget what a miracle this actually is.

Today is the start of Holy week, the last week of Jesus' life. We had a Palm Sunday theme last Sunday and today will focus on the account of Jesus' crucifixion as told in the Gospel of Luke

PSALM READING – PSALM 31:9-16

The words of Psalm 31 describe the experience of Jesus in his time of suffering and also provide a way to cry out to God whenever we are feeling desperate:

Be merciful to me, LORD, for I am in distress;

*my eyes grow weak with sorrow,
my soul and body with grief.*

*¹⁰ My life is consumed by anguish
and my years by groaning;
my strength fails because of my affliction,¹⁰*

and my bones grow weak.

*¹¹ Because of all my enemies,
I am the utter contempt of my neighbors
and an object of dread to my closest friends—*

those who see me on the street flee

from me.

*¹² I am forgotten as though I were dead;
I have become like broken pottery.*

*¹³ For I hear many whispering,
"Terror on every side!"*

*They conspire against me
and plot to take my life.*

*¹⁴ But I trust in you, LORD;
I say, "You are my God."*

*¹⁵ My times are in your hands;
deliver me from the hands of my enemies,*

from those who pursue me.

*¹⁶ Let your face shine on your servant;
save me in your unfailing love.*

CALL TO WORSHIP

We have been progressively lighting one candle fewer each week. As the final Sunday before Easter, we will light just one candle on the cross up at the front table.

Join me with these ancient words of the early church as we choose to worship today:

Leader: O Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world

People: Have mercy on us.

Leader: O Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world

All: Grant us your peace, grant us your peace!

PRAYER OF INVOCATION

(From *Words of Worship 2 #210*)

Holy God,

The earth waits in silence:

We tremble before your presence.

In the cross of Christ, we see and feel the immensity of your love and our unworthiness.

Open our hearts now to receive your redeeming grace.

We pray in the name of our Savior. Amen

SERMON: "THE UPSIDE-DOWN KING" (PART 2) – PASTOR CALEB

Luke 23:26-49

That's a lot of verses, which is why we broke them up into two parts. Come to think of it, you might try to remember when was the last time you heard this very familiar and central narrative read aloud.

If you have regularly come to Maundy Thursday services, then you probably have heard this or parallel passages read. But because we normally go from Palm Sunday to Easter, it isn't very common for a pastor to actually preach on this passage.

At the heart of God's story and our story is a tragic death. That sounds like a downer to me. But the good news is that Jesus' courage and faithfulness in death, means that none of us need fear the worst.

God is with us in the worst and redeems the worst. We can trust Jesus, as we follow him through the worst.

And when we are at *our* worst, we share in the forgiveness that Jesus offered from the cross, when we choose to let this Upside-down King transform us.

ENTERING THE STORY

I'll review this story from the standpoint of three themes:

1. lament and mourning
2. Jesus as an apparently failed king
3. Forgiveness

At the beginning of our scripture reading, Jesus is led away toward the hill of the Skull, where he will be crucified. They make Simon of Cyrene carry the cross, probably because Jesus is too weak to do that.

Many people are following, including women who are mourning. It's normal in that culture to hit oneself as a sign of grief.

Women are mentioned both at this point in the account and following Jesus' death. While the male disciples have fled, the women who followed Jesus stay with him.

Jesus is moved by these women, but asks them to weep for themselves and their children rather than for him.

Jesus foretells future destruction for Jerusalem: days so hard that it will be more blessed to be childless – normally considered a curse – than to see your children not survive in the conflict.

Jesus' words are hard to interpret, but I take him to be saying: the time hasn't arrived for the Romans to destroy the city, but if you see what they are doing to me now, know that it isn't going to be pretty later.

In a moment of grief and lament, Jesus still encourages lament for others, not simply himself. This is an expression of Jesus' love for people.

In our time, we too are called to lament for people beyond ourselves – for those who have lost loved ones to Covid, for those who have lost work, for victims of our ongoing epidemic of gun violence, for asylum seekers that cannot see hope in their own lands, for our ever-glaring divides of race and class.

Second, like last week, I want to pick up the theme of how this narrative presents Jesus as an upside-down king. There's no denying that there is as much king-language here as ever, yet Jesus completely defies what a king is supposed to do.

He is stripped of his clothing, instead of being dressed regally. They briefly dressed him in purple only as a stunt of mockery.

Rather than a real crown or wreath, he was given a crown of thorns.

Rather than a regal procession, he is led to the cross.

Rather than a throne, he is lifted up on a stake beside criminals.

Overhead is the notice: "This one is king of the Jews," a sign that insults not only Jesus, but also the whole Jewish population.

Three groups of people mock him, saying "if you are the Messiah, the king, why don't you come down from that cross and save yourself?"

First, it's the people watching, then the soldiers, and finally one of the criminals right next to Jesus. Jesus is ridiculed and misunderstood. We could even say that Jesus is an anti-king – he doesn't fit the bill.

Followers of Jesus sometimes experience ridicule as well. The church building of my home church that still stands was built in 1917.

However, the night before it was to be dedicated, the building was vandalized. Think about what was happening in 1917 – World War I. Germany was the enemy, the Mennonites spoke German, and also did not participate in war.

Flags were put up, and the following poem was painted on the new building:

*Say folks this is Kaiserville,
as bad as any 'round*

*They don't like Uncle Sam,
or any folks 'round.*

*They build a hell of their own.
They thought it looked lot wiser*

*Bally Kinsinger he's Von Hindenburg;
Abner Yoder he's their Kaiser.*

*The kind of religion they have
would make the angels weep*

*For they're a bunch of wolves
dressed in the clothes of sheep*

They were ridiculed and misunderstood. Though, I must say one thing that's changed is that I can't imagine vandalism with this kind of meter and rhyme today.

The final lens that I want to look at this story is that of forgiveness.

The crucifixion of Jesus is humanity at its worst. It's the same kind of violence that we have always carried out against whoever can be scapegoated and blamed for our problems.

Jesus was the embodiment of the love of God, and putting real flesh and blood on the love of God risks getting hurt. Maybe crucifixion was an inevitable part of the incarnation. When God approaches us with love, our systems and collective sin respond with violence. This is humanity at our worst, and we still participate in this collective sin today.

Verse 34 contains the striking prayer of Jesus that I'm sure you all remember: *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do."* It's what I consider one of the most moving parts of this story.

You'll be surprised to hear that this line is actually absent in many of the earliest manuscripts discovered in diverse geographical locations. Bible translators depend on the painstakingly tedious work of comparing thousands of ancient copies to most accurately reconstruct the original words.

That's why the NRSV has it enclosed in brackets. Scholars would debate whether this prayer was really part of the original gospel of Luke.

At the same time, it fits what we know of Jesus elsewhere in Luke. Additionally, one can imagine the prayer was scandalous enough, some scribes might have preferred not to copy it. After all, the city of Jerusalem did end up falling to the Romans, taken by some to be a sign that God did *not* forgive the city.

One of the scholars concludes that Jesus' prayer, "bears self-evident tokens of its dominical origin." That's scholar-speak for "it sure sounds like something Jesus would say!"

We've been talking about how Jesus on that cross looked like anything but a real king. One of the criminals joined in the taunting.

But the other "gets it." He believes that there's something so true in Jesus that this must be how God is bringing true human community – not the cheap human substitutes that we call kingdoms or nations.

He says, *"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."*

It is maybe the greatest expression of faith in the Gospels. Here is this failed king, hanging from an executionary stake. What kingdom?

But the criminal believes in Jesus' way, believes that somehow, in ways we don't yet understand, God will create a completely different kind of kingdom than earthly kingdoms through Jesus' path of radical love, nonviolence, and courage.

Jesus promises "today you will be with me in Paradise." Paradise is another word for garden. The earliest readers would have thought of the Garden of Eden and its vision of harmony between humans and creation. God has not given up on restoring that vision.

After hours of darkness, and the temple curtain being torn in two, the centurion watching also "gets it." He glorifies God, declaring that Jesus is innocent. "Innocent" seems like too weak of a word. This is the righteous one, and righteousness is on display in the courage and steadfastness of Jesus up to his last breath.

In Jesus, God is with us in the worst, even when we are at our worst. God has the power to redeem the worst, transform it into salvation.

This past year has been difficult. We are facing as much uncertainty and loss as ever in our personal and family lives, as well as our congregation.

Over and over, we have stories in the Gospels and the Bible as a whole, when the biblical characters are “afraid,” “perplexed,” or “astonished.” This happens with some of Jesus’ great deeds, and at all of the theophanies – thin spaces where humans directly perceive God. God’s message is always “do not be afraid.” Jesus said, “Be not afraid of them that can kill the body and after that have no more than they can do.” (Luke 12:4).

Jesus lived by those words in his last breaths. Howard Thurman wrote that fearing another person was a denial of the integrity of one’s own life: “There are some things that are worse than death. To deny one’s own integrity of personality in the presence of the human challenge is one of those things.”¹

The cross is the absolute worst that can happen. In biblical culture (and maybe our own), the worst fate was not death, nor sickness, but “being put to shame.”

This is why the psalmist in Psalm 31:17 – right where the psalm reading earlier left off – asked, “let me not be put to shame, LORD, for I have cried out to you.”

Crucifixion was not designed just to inflict physical pain. It was designed first of all to humiliate its victims, who hung naked and emaciated for all to see.

This is the worst, and yet God redeemed Jesus and all who follow after out of this worst.

CONCLUSION

One of the questions I leave you with in the bulletin is about what do you find the most moving in the narration of Jesus’ death? How does it challenge the program that your life is currently following?

There will be as many answers as there are of all of you.

In this time, I can only say I am moved by the courage and compassion of Jesus. I can only hope that I learn to practice the kind of faithfulness that is willing to suffer if what I say I believe in is tested.

I am learning to trust a solid ground beneath my feet when I feel broken or afraid. The story of Jesus little by little chips away at my need to be successful, to be liked, to have a flawless and perfect life, and to feel I’m in control of my life.

¹ Thurman, Howard. *Jesus and the Disinherited*. New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1949, p. 51

May each of us learn to find this solid ground, no matter what is the worst that we face. There is no worst place that God cannot meet us there, redeem us, and redeem the world.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION AND ASSURANCE

Leader: Lord Jesus Christ, in this sacred and solemn week we are reminded again of your upside-down ways. Forgive us when we fail to see your grace at work in the world.

All: Help us to follow where you go, to stop where you stumble, to listen when you cry, to hurt as you suffer.

(silence)

Leader: Lord Jesus Christ, in this sacred and solemn week, help us to see again the depth and mystery of your redeeming love.

All: Help us to follow where you go, to bow our heads in sorrow when you die, so that when you are raised to life again, we may share your endless joy. Amen.

BENEDICTION

We have seen the suffering of our Savior;

We have marveled at the abundance of God's grace

Now go forth as loved and forgiven people

And share the love of Christ in the world.