

Slow Walk through Holy Week: The Cross
Mark 15:1-39
Rev. Meredith Loftis
Palm and Passion Sunday, April 14, 2019

“As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. 2 Pilate asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” He answered him, “You say so.” 3 Then the chief priests accused him of many things. 4 Pilate asked him again, “Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you.” 5 But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.

6 Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. 7 Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. 8 So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. 9 Then he answered them, “Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?” 10 For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. 11 But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. 12 Pilate spoke to them again, “Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?” 13 They shouted back, “Crucify him!” 14 Pilate asked them, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Crucify him!” 15 So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

16 Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor’s headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort. 17 And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. 18 And they began saluting him, “Hail, King of the Jews!” 19 They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. 20 After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

21 They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus. 22 Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). 23 And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. 24 And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.

25 It was nine o’clock in the morning when they crucified him. 26 The inscription of the charge against him read, “The King of the Jews.” 27 And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left. 29 Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, “Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, 30 save yourself, and come down from the cross!” 31 In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. 32 Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.” Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

33 When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. 34 At three o’clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” 35 When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, “Listen, he is calling for Elijah.” 36 And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.” 37 Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. 38 And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. 39 Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was God’s Son!”

I had never seen one in real life. It was huge. Heavy. It could only be carried in a box, otherwise, it would seriously hurt someone. It mimicked a laurel leaf crown, what Caesar would have worn as the self-proclaimed divine son of God and ruler of Israel; instead the curved vines and thorns on this crown would pierce God's only begotten Son, and the blood would drip down his face.

Be merciful to me, LORD, for I am in distress; my eyes grow weak with sorrow, my soul and body with grief. The words of Psalm 31, our second scripture lesson, should echo through our minds as they may have Jesus'. *But I trust in you, Lord; I say, "You are my God." My times are in your hands...Let your face shine on your servant; save me in your unfailing love.*

We imagined Christ's final walk in life as we carried this replica in a box through Market Square, until it was determined it was too dangerous to carry this past year. Our Catholic friends had brought Christ's crown as part of our ecumenical Good Friday Service, a foreign prop to us Protestants. The kids would all clamor to carry the wooden cross; but the thorns always remained sequestered, only seen through a clear lid, unable to be touched, pointing to the torture and unspeakable death that was to come.

After the waving palms, but before the empty tomb and the Easter eggs, we approach it once again—Golgotha, the place of a skull—with a tree to bear Christ's body and his title, "King of the Jews," the crown of thorns tangled in his hair.

Our walk has been slow and steady as we journeyed intentionally through Holy Week for the past five Sundays, walking Christ's path to the Cross. It is the journey that we commemorate starting today, with Palm/Passion Sunday, which continues in Holy Week and to Good Friday.

Our first destination of Holy Week: The city of David. A little grey donkey ushering Christ into Jerusalem, as William started us off with Palm Sunday those many weeks ago, which we have remembered again today with palms and shouts of hosanna. As soon as that donkey's hoof entered the gates of Jerusalem, Jesus knew the path to his death had begun; his plan falling into place. The Roman authorities were already on high alert, it being the Passover festival, when the influx of Jewish pilgrims into the holy city greatly increased. They would increase their appearance as well, having their own parades in order to display their power. Jesus' entrance on a donkey spoke volumes, for "entering the city in this way deliberately mimicked Solomon, [King] David's son, who one thousand years earlier rode the royal mule as part of his declaration of kingship...such an event suggested in unmistakable terms that Israel's king was Jesus, not Caesar."¹ The Jews who welcomed him would know what this meant. In those moments that Jesus rides his steed, his actions speak volumes. His presence shaking the religious establishment and Roman Empire into conspiracy and violence; they must staunch this revolutionary's threat by all means.

From his royal processional of palms, we are led to the temple and remember Jesus' anger and rage as he overturned the tables in the temple marketplace. In Bethany, we smell the perfume that runs over Jesus' gleaming head, as that nameless woman broke open a costly jar of nard and anointed Jesus' head and body; for she knew, as he did, that death was close at hand. The third Sunday in Lent, we saw Judas' betrayal as he looked upon this woman's devotion; the true disciple unnamed, the betrayer ironically named instead.

The final Sunday in March, we gathered at table, remembering Christ's Last Supper; his broken body; his blood, the new covenant; his betrayer at hand, invited to dine with them, even as Jesus knew what Judas was plotting.

Last week, we gathered in that garden at nightfall, Gethsemane, the final place where Jesus can have one moment of peace, and we viewed his last radical act: to pray, though he's in agony; for prayer shapes us...and it shapes God.

We finish our walk through Holy Week today at the cross. Jesus' wilderness journey comes to a halting, devastating conclusion, his cry of pain ringing in our ears.

¹ Craig A. Evans and N. T. Wright, *Jesus, the Final Days*, page 5 and 6.

We know that Jesus entered the wilderness for 40 days to be tempted by the devil; but in reality, Jesus lived in the wilderness for 33 years. For the entirety of his life, the Son of God bore witness to and knew the wilderness of the human realm. He came to know the suffering and violence that defined the Jews living under foreign occupation. Jesus, God-incarnate, came to know the brokenness that is inherently a part of life. This divine God-man experienced the cruelty of darkness and violence, though he only brought life and light; he was charged with the most excruciating form of death, meant for rebellious slaves, “its primary purpose to deter rebellion.”²

Shouts of “Crucify him! Crucify him!” ring all around him. But he doesn’t react. Jesus has accepted the cup he has been given and will not turn back. His tormentors beat and flay him, wrap a royal purple cloth around him, a reed as his scepter, a cruel crown upon his head. This brutal display of mockery serves as his royal coronation.

And so, trembling and shaking, Christ bears his crown of thorns and lifts the cross upon his back, and step by excruciating step, he walks on. The crowd now mocking him, any familiar faces now hidden. When he can bear its weight no longer, the guards conscript a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, to carry the cross the remaining distance to Golgotha. *God, are you there?*

Trembling and shaking, Christ’s followers hide behind closed doors. Shaken to their core, fearful they too will be arrested and executed. They cannot understand how this man, who could heal the illest outcasts and command the fiercest storms and feed thousands, could not save himself. He was supposed to be the Messiah and end their oppression. They had invested so much in him; why wouldn’t he fight back? *God, have you forsaken us?*

Trembling and shaking, the women who followed and served Jesus, follow their master and watch as he is nailed to a tree, and lifted into the sky. They stand at the foot of the cross and bear witness, the very place his disciples should be. But they see. *God, have you turned away from us?*

Trembling and shaking, even creation could not keep still at God’s torture and death. From noon until three o’clock, an abnormal darkness covered the earth, the death of God at hand. *God, even your creation wonders, have you forgotten us?*

I imagine Caesar and his Roman soldiers could only watch in bafflement, wondering what their land was haunted by, unaware that they were executing God. Unaware that their violence would give way to peace; their powers subject to God’s power. For God’s death was only the springboard to something so new and miraculous, no one could fathom it.

Theologian Paul Tillich writes:

“Trembling and shaking, the earth participated in the agony of the man on the cross and the despair of all those who had seen in him the beginning of a new eon. Trembling and shaking, the earth proved that it was not the motherly ground on which we can build our houses and cities, our cultures and religious systems. Trembling and shaking, the earth points to another ground on which the earth itself rests: the self-surrendering love on which all earthly powers and values concentrate their hostility and which they cannot conquer. Since the hour when Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last and the rocks split, the earth ceased to be the foundation of what we build on her. Only insofar as it has a deeper ground can it stand; only insofar as it is rooted in the same foundation in which the cross is rooted can it last.”³

That other ground that Tillich points to, a ground so secure in God’s person and being, is only revealed through Christ’s death. This is where we become rooted, because God’s power transforms the cross and cries of despair into shouts of acclamation and Hallelujahs. No earthly foundation can prove to secure or save us; the foundation upon which we rest is only founded on God’s self-surrendering love, revealed in the foolishness of a cross and the Godflesh that dared take it on. Somehow, in the mystery of that cross, our salvation and healing is bound. Somehow in the violence God is able to transform

² Craig A. Evans and N. T. Wright, *Jesus, the Final Days*, page 29.

³ *Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter*, page 256.

darkness into nourishing life. And so we must encounter Christ's death, his suffering, remember how the very earth upon which we live groaned out in lament and despair, as if the land itself could raise its voice in cries as Jesus did.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" cries out Jesus. But not words that belong to him, words that he has long known and echoes from the 22nd Psalm; words that all of creation and the heavens hear as God hung upon a criminal's cross; the gospel writer's words revealing the depth of human pain and abandonment he feels. Jesus shows us what abandonment and doubt in God looks like. He shows us what it means to use the liturgy of pain given to us in the Psalms. *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest.* It is clear we are to see and acknowledge the suffering servant, that Jesus was not spared any pain. His words give us permission to express our deepest darkness. These words are ours too.

Jesus laments. The earth responds in kind. The Temple's curtain rips. All is affected by this death.

"While we cannot know the mind of Jesus, we do know the Psalm he quotes. It is a lament psalm in the rich tradition of protesting God's seeming absence from the center of our lives." It's the, "Why, God? Where are you? Have you forgotten me?" It's giving voice to the things that haunt us, that drive us into the pit of despair we feel we can never escape. "The lament Psalms are filled with terror and hurt and bewilderment and confusion about the absence of God when life is not going well...While a lament protests against God's absence, it eventuates in a renewed sense of God's presence."⁴

For many of us, and for me, I'll admit, it is troubling to see the doubt and anguish upon Christ's lips. We want him to be strong and show courage, and we see this in the other gospel narratives. But honestly, this is the version I need. I need to see that Jesus was in fact, fully human, experienced pain that I know, protested to God Almighty, "Why? Why do I suffer? Why have you left me?" Are we brave enough to echo Jesus when we too suffer? To insist that God show up and listen?

Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel illustrates this courage to protest and challenge God in many of his writings. One in particular stays with me. He tells of the story of a Jewish family sent into exile after living under an oppressive monarchy in Europe that threatened to kill them.

"The man, his wife, and their two children try to make their way across an endless desert. All of them fall asleep one night, but only three wake up in the morning. The father digs a grave for his wife and proceeds to recite a hymn of praise known as the Kaddish. The next day the father loses his older son, and he proceeds to respond in the same way. The night, when the surviving son passes on, the man digs another grave and prays to God:

"Master of the Universe, I know what You want - I understand what You are doing. You want to overwhelm me. You want me to cease believing in You, to cease praying to You, to cease invoking your name to glorify and sanctify it. Well, I tell You: No, no - a thousand times, no! You shall not succeed! In spite of me and in spite of You, I shall shout the Kaddish, which is a song of faith, for You and against You. This song You shall not still, God of Israel."⁵

This song upon Christ's lips as he hung dying cannot be thwarted, it does not lie limp or hang unheard. This song God shall not allow to sit still upon Jesus' lips. Christ shouts. God hears. God works. God transforms the cross. God transforms us.

Holy Week begins for us. Let us walk boldly with Christ, our lips mingling with Jesus as we insist that we be heard.

⁴ *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark*, page 520.

⁵ Jonathan L. Walton, *A Lens of Love*, page 75.