

YOU WERE THERE
Isaiah 53:1-12
Luke 19:29-40
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Palm Sunday, April 1, 2012

Today, Palm Sunday, we remember Christ's triumphant entry into Jerusalem to the cries of "Hosanna" while the crowds waved palm branches as their ancestors did when the kings of the House of David paraded on the day of their coronations. But we also call today Passion Sunday, because it also marks Christ's last hurrah before plunging into his crucifixion on Good Friday.

Good Friday compels us to take a long hard look, not only at the actual players in the last act of Jesus' life, but also ourselves. As we watch the disciples, especially Peter, or the High Priest Caiaphas and the Roman governor Pilate, reacting to events far beyond their control we should look again until we see ourselves pushing our agendas and manipulating people to promote or protect ourselves at the expense of others.

There's no denying Good Friday reveals both the best and worst of human nature as you watch everyone take their cues and willingly play their roles. That's why the old African American spiritual "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?" is a question you can't sidestep no matter how hard you try. So, if you want to take Jesus seriously, wonder about this: if you were transported back to Jerusalem on Good Friday, whose place in the story would you take?

Perhaps Pilate, the Roman governor, whose lust for power and need to manipulate people and situations to save his own skin, surely reflects our own need to be in control and our potential for moral cowardice.

Or maybe Caiaphas, the High Priest of the Temple, convinced he had God all figured out but when confronted with Jesus found his self-serving ways and preconceived notions not only questioned but threatened.

What about the disciples who even on the night before Jesus died argued with each other over which of them would be the greatest in the Kingdom of God, but then at the critical moment, when Jesus needed them most, ran like rabbits, deserting their friend at the first hint of trouble? If you can remember a time you became a fair weather friend, maybe you can see yourself in one of them.

Of course, we can't forget the pilgrims in the crowd who crammed into Jerusalem for the Passover. Maybe they cheered him on Palm Sunday but when Jesus failed to be the Messiah they wanted, they quickly turned on him.

Then again, maybe you see yourself as one of the few who stayed with Jesus. Truth be told, we all have the potential to be brave and good in times of trouble, and this is nobly demonstrated in John, the Beloved Disciple, and the women who stood with Jesus to the bitter end. I'm sure there've been times you took the risk to support a friend in crisis, so the case can be made you can also be counted with the good and faithful friends of Good Friday.

These are some of the players in the Passion story. Take a long, hard look at them. Can you see yourself in any or all of them?

If it's too hard or terrible imagining yourself crucifying Jesus, let's look instead at another true story through which you can also see yourself playing a similar role in a similar situation.

April 15th marks the hundredth anniversary of the sinking of the Titanic. I'm sure you're familiar with it either through books and articles or films. It's not just a tragic story, it's also a first rate morality play. What's more, like the crucifixion, it's an actual historical event. As you watch this story unfold don't you wonder, "How would I have acted if I was there when the Titanic sank?"

In the books I've read and the films I've seen, I've observed at least three ways passengers and crew members reacted to the crisis.

First, there were those who acted cowardly, bumping women and children from their rightful places on a lifeboat, conniving and bribing, even using violence to save their necks. They intentionally worked against the greater good for their own good, sort of like Judas, Caiaphas and Pilate, but through it all ended up only shaming themselves.

Next, there were those who tried to run and hide, like Peter and the other disciples who also ran and hid when Jesus was arrested. To be sure these passengers didn't do anything to harm others. They didn't plot and connive to save themselves. Instead they just ran away by getting drunk or playing poker or burying themselves in a book. Understandably some of them probably suffered nervous breakdowns and simply retreated into themselves, but the rest of them chose to run from the responsibility of comforting and helping others in their hour of deepest need, sort of like Peter and the other disciples.

Finally, we see the real heroes in the story, passengers and crew members alike, who remind me of the Beloved Disciple and those brave women who stayed with Jesus to the bitter end. They ennobled themselves by helping out where they could, with older women giving up their place in a lifeboat for someone younger, passengers and crew members doing whatever they could to help and comfort others, knowing all along they would die in the icy waters. Even after the last lifeboat cast off they continued being a brave, Christ-like presence for the sake of those left behind.

Certainly in both the Good Friday and Titanic stories you see human nature at its best and worst, and as you watch these stories unfold that same question lingers, “If I was there, what would I have done?”

Let’s be honest, sometimes we take on the role of Pilate or Peter, sometimes we rise to the occasion and show ourselves to be as strong and brave as those who stood at the foot of the cross. The truth is, we’re a mixed bag of good and bad, not so good and not so bad.

But isn’t that precisely why Jesus allowed himself to be crucified? Despite our good intentions, we remain inconsistent in right living and left to our own devices we’re hopelessly lost. Sooner than later we must face the truth: our sin nailed Jesus to the cross just as surely as Caiaphas and Pilate prosecuted and executed him. Even so, as strange as it seems, our sin was used by God to secure our salvation. God took our worst and gave us back his best. That is the paradox and glory of the cross: while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.

This Holy Week I encourage you to witness Christ’s passion especially through the eyes of the young people we are baptizing and confirming today. Finding themselves in between childhood and adulthood, their faith is in the process of formation as they begin the struggle to make their parents’ faith their own.

In many of his letters to the churches, the Apostle Paul speaks of Christ’s Gospel, but he also calls Christ’s Gospel “my” gospel. Like a conductor or band leader who takes a composition and makes it his own by blending his personality and interpretation with the original composer’s, today’s confirmands are beginning the lifelong process of growing into the faith of our fathers so when the time comes, God willing, they can pass their faith on to their children.

It’s both wonderful and exciting to see anyone being drawn into Christ and, with the faith of a child, allow themselves to get caught up into the mystery of God. Please, as far as it depends on you, don’t let their growing faith atrophy and die. All of us, parents and sponsors, adult friends and neighbors can’t afford to abdicate our calling to nurture and encourage those Christ lovingly called his “little ones.” We need to commit ourselves to them but also learn from them as God uses them to reawaken in us our lost youthful enthusiasm and ideals.

If you believe what I say is true, this week especially, remember Jesus. Don’t deny or betray, oppose or reject him in his hour of need by being inattentive to your neighbors in their hour of need. Be a faithful disciple and friend with the growing awareness that Christ is the best friend any of us will ever have.

Hear the good news, “...God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8)

Were you there when they crucified our Lord? Don't be afraid to admit your guilt, instead embrace it so Christ can embrace you.

Let us pray.

Lord, as we make our way through this week to your Cross, send your Holy Spirit and all your angels in heaven to keep us from being distracted from your great and eternal sacrifice of yourself for the sins of the world. Help us realize the least we can do is be attentive to you in your last hours of service to the least of these before you willingly took on your burden of separation from your beloved Father in heaven.

As we watch you teach, heal and love people in greatest need, inspire us to follow your example as we forsake our needs for the greater good that can only be accomplished through and by you alone.

O Christ, the Master Carpenter, who at the last, through wood and nail, purchased forever our salvation, use well your tools in the workshop of your world, so that we who approach your bench unfinished and broken, may be refinished and restored by your crucified hands, so we can follow in your footsteps.

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