



SERMONS THAT WORK

Good Friday

The Passion According to John

[RCL]: Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22; Hebrews 10:16-25; John 18:1-19:42

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

Today we have heard some of the most beautiful, painful, heart-wrenching passages of scripture, juxtaposed with one of the holiest, most beautiful, painful, heart-wrenching moments of the Christian story. Jesus, our beloved healer, lover of souls, champion of the poor, weak, and oppressed, the man who washed the feet of his friends, has been betrayed by one of those same friends. He has been misunderstood and accused by the leaders of his own people. He has heard the shouts of “Crucify him! Crucify him!” when the crowd had the chance to set him free. Maybe some of those people had been among the crowds listening to Jesus preach, and been changed by the encounter. Even Peter denies that he knows him. Three times! How complicated and interwoven are those who love him and those who condemn him!

The suffering servant passage from Isaiah, which we heard today, describes a humble, indigenous servant who was both astonishing and rejected by those around him and “by a perversion of justice... taken away.” This sounds to us Christians like the tragedy of Jesus’ betrayal, suffering, and death. For some Christians, this passage is understood as an *explicit* prophecy of Christ’s suffering and death. For them, Isaiah 53 is an important proof-text that Christianity was predicted by the Hebrew prophet centuries before Jesus’ birth.

But how was the suffering servant understood by the Jews of Jesus’ time, indeed by Jesus himself? Rabbinic interpretation, acknowledged by the early church father Origen, identifies the suffering servant in Isaiah 52-53 as a personification of the nation of Israel, which had repeatedly suffered at the hands of Gentile oppressors.

According to the rabbinic interpretation, the speakers of the Isaiah passage are the startled kings of the surrounding nations: “Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?” These kings, in the messianic age in which the passage is set, humbly admit that a righteous people has suffered at their hands. At last, the Jewish people will be rewarded for their faith, and they will return from exile.

At the time when Jesus lived, Judaism was a diverse religion. The Pharisees and the Sadducees were influential factions with differing beliefs and practices. Other first-century Jewish factions included the Essenes, the Zealots, the Jews of the Diaspora who were influenced by Greek and Roman culture, Herodians, Hasideans, followers of John the Baptist, and those Jews who followed Jesus and believed he was the Messiah and Son of God.

Belief in salvation by a messiah at the end time was an acceptable concept among Jews. It would be possible to affirm belief in Jesus as savior and still be part of the first-century Jewish community; this community would not have rejected belief in a messiah, but did not necessarily believe in this particular messiah. Thus, the family from Bethany—Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, as described in John 11—could comfortably live within the Jewish community and still profess faith in Jesus as Christ and Son of God.

Biblical scholars suggest that the Johannine community—the community for which John the Evangelist wrote—consisted of Jews whose belief in Jesus involved a relatively low Christology. The writer of the Gospel according to John, however, advocates a higher Christology. We have seen that belief in Jesus as Messiah did not necessarily require separation from the surrounding Jewish community; the problem is one of identity. The core of the Jewish identity was adherence to the law, circumcision, and observation of the Sabbath and certain festivals. Messianism would be only a tangential aspect of identity. For the Johannine writer, the core of community identity lay in professing Jesus as Christ and Son of God. This amounted to a rejection of the community's Jewish roots and led to a collision course with the Jewish authorities; claiming that Jesus was God's equal was going too far.

Hostility was inevitable as the Jesus-believing Jews came to see their movement as one distinct from Jewish identity. The split between high and low Christology is explicit in John 19, verse 7: “The Jews answered him, ‘We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God.’” This emphasis on a separate identity, this separation into Us and Them, is disturbing, ugly, and dangerous to most ears today. In John, the bad guys, the Christ-killers, are the chief priests and Pharisees, the Jewish police, the Jewish crowd. The Jews. The Romans and Pontius Pilate are explicitly exonerated. The blame falls squarely on the Jews, who seem to have enlisted the Romans' help to avoid killing the man themselves, which would have been both illegal and caused ritual uncleanness at the beginning of Passover.

We know that there are historical and theological reasons for John's language about the Jews. We know that John wrote at a time when the Jewish followers of Jesus were carving out an identity separate from their parent Jewish community. Yet we cannot erase the centuries of ugly persecution of our Jewish neighbors that have resulted from the Us and Them separation created by John's text.

And so, we are left with the beauty, pain, and polemic of John's Gospel. This is Good Friday. For a moment, politics and history fall away, and we are left with the poetry of the Passion according to John. We stand at the foot of the cross. Peter and the disciples are confused and terrified. The three Marys are heartbroken. One of the most human and moving moments in the Passion is the passage where Jesus gives his mother into the care of the Beloved Disciple. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus overcome their doubts and fears enough to ask Pilate for Jesus' body. We have reached the time and place when the body is in the tomb. A time of darkness. A time when death seems to have triumphed. A time when it is difficult to have faith.

John tells us that Jesus knew all that was going to happen to him. The hearers of the tale in John's community knew. *We* know what is going to happen. This story is headed towards hope, death overcome, the certainty of the Resurrection. Yet over and over again, our hearts break for the disciples, for Jesus' mother, for all who loved him.

On the night before he died, in the Farewell Discourse, Jesus spoke of how his followers are to live when he is gone. We are to live in faith that we will see him again. We are to learn from and be comforted by the Holy Spirit. We are to love one another as he has loved us. We are to live in unity with God and with one another.

Let us pray: Gracious God, may we love each other as Christ loved us. May we gather in community, in our times of grief and despair as in times of gladness. May we turn toward the day when weeping and mourning will turn to joy, by the power of the Holy Spirit. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

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