

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Good Friday (10 April 2020)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

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Almighty God, we pray you graciously to behold this your family, for whom our Lord Jesus Christ was willing to be betrayed, and given into the hands of sinners, and to suffer death upon the cross; who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Isaiah 52:13-53:12, Hebrews 10:16-25, John 18:1-19:42, Psalm 22

1 Beginning: Once upon a time...

Jesus entered into the night of his passion understanding exactly what was going to happen. The other Gospels tell of Jesus' bloody sweat and *more* earnest prayers in the Garden, shuddering at the pain he is about to endure. But as we read tonight, John portrays Jesus regally, a king passing through every obstacle like water on the way to his enthronement. Except that throne is a cross. That's where Jesus is headed.

And the disciples are pretty sure they don't want to go there.

The girl on duty at the door said to Peter, 'Aren't you another of that man's disciples?' He answered, 'I am not.' Jn 18.17 NJB

As Simon Peter stood there warming himself, someone said to him, 'Aren't you another of his disciples?' He denied it saying, 'I am not.' Jn 18.25 NJB

Peter is being tested, he has reached a crisis moment. The question is put to him very plainly:

Are you a disciple of Jesus?

I am not.

This from the man who, only hours earlier at the last supper swore he would never forsake Jesus, even if it led to death. So much passion. So little perseverance.

I'm reminded of James and John, jostling to sit at Jesus' right hand and left in Matthew and Mark – to be Jesus' second- and third- in command. Jesus' response to them was, "Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink?" Mt 20.22 NJB They said yes. But now the time has come, and they have run away.

Jesus was on a mission. The twelve weren't ready to go there.

Are you a disciple of Jesus?

I am not.

2 Middle: Tension: destabilizing

We've heard Jesus say, "Whoever would be my disciple must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." I think that saying was getting a little too literal for Peter in this moment. Despite Jesus' warnings and preparations, when the moment came, Peter wasn't ready for it.

When that question comes to us, often we're not ready for it.

While the work that Jesus did on the cross was something important and new in the world, something that we'll talk about on Easter Sunday, what happened on Thursday night and Friday was nothing new. It was nothing new at all. And we can see the cross spread all across our readings tonight.

In Isaiah we read of a suffering servant. One who was disfigured in his pain, one who was unattractive, despised, a man of sorrows. On who, in his suffering, somehow brought relief, redemption, rescue to God's people. Isaiah is a prophet, but I don't know that that means Isaiah was sitting there in a trance, his hand being moved by God like some ancient ouija board parlor trick. Isaiah's prophetic voice was one that looked at how he had seen God act in history, who took what he had learned of God's character and God's M.O., and discerned how that intersected with his own present time to understand what was coming. For sure the fullest interpretation of what Isaiah foresaw came in the person of Jesus: that's what we believe as Christians. But Isaiah wasn't talking that far ahead. Isaiah was talking about God's rescue, about what God was up to, in his own era.

Likewise we read Psalm 22 more than once during Holy Week. Every time I hear Psalm 22 it sends shivers down my spine for how minutely it calls forth the details of Jesus' crucifixion. But again, the Psalmist was not writing primarily about Jesus of Nazareth. The Psalmist was writing about how God had worked in contemporary history. The Psalmist was writing about his or her own life.

That's exactly the power of the Psalms, isn't it? We don't read Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" and think, "wow: somebody was upset." We read that and think, "Yeah: I've been there." Or very often we read it and think, "I feel that. That's my experience, too." That's the whole power of the Psalms down the ages, bringing the human experience to verbal expression and situating those experiences within God's world.

Psalm 22 wasn't something Jesus had memorized in case he needed to use it someday. It was something Jesus had already felt, already experienced, already hidden in his heart. Jesus already knew and understood the feeling of God's absence, the pain of rejection and persecution. And Jesus already knew that stubborn note of hope and redemption that comes at the end of the Psalm. That was already a part of Jesus' life, a familiar pattern for Jesus, so that the cross, while extreme, fit the pattern he already knew.

In this season of COVID-19, this season of lockdowns and quarantines and isolation, this season of dull boredom, heightened anxiety, and fearful expectation of death entering into our own families and friendship circles, we are bearing crosses of our own. We are being stripped, like the altar on Maundy Thursday, of our protective layers and our carefully arranged appearances. The competencies and self-sufficiency that we like to display and believe in are being shown as frauds, thin veneers painted over top of something more vulnerable. We are being asked whether the cup of Jesus, the suffering of the cross, is something we are capable of bearing with grace and gratitude – or whether we, like Peter, are going struggle with sword and denial every step of the way.

It was Peter who, upon being told *by Jesus* that Jesus would die, insisted this shouldn't happen. Jesus rebuked him, saying "Get behind me Satan! You are an obstacle in my path, because you are thinking not as God thinks but as human beings do."^{Mt 16.23 NJB} Indeed, when the mob came to the garden to arrest Jesus, it was Peter in his fear and fragility who tried to derail the whole operation by taking his sword and striking out. Jesus had to disarm Peter and heal one of his persecutors in order to carry forward the work he was about. As he did so, he used the same word he had earlier spoken to James and John: "Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?"^{Jn 18.11b NJB}

3 End: Now / not yet; Because God... therefore...

It's no surprise to us, with 2000 years of hindsight, that Jesus succeeded in the work he was about that night.

The twelve were in the garden praying with Jesus, as was their habit. When the mob came, the normal thing would be to arrest the whole gang, the co-conspirators with the ring-leader. But Jesus protected the twelve, arranging for them to go free, allowing them to continue in their process of growth toward discipleship.

Indeed, that night Peter, though denying Jesus with his lips, did what disciples do and followed Jesus to the high priest's house, putting himself in danger in order to be a disciple with his body.

That Friday, as Jesus completed his work, he showed the twelve and all his community of disciples that crucifixion, that pain and suffering and even death, are part of the path of anyone who would follow Jesus. *Take up your cross and follow me*, said Jesus.

And that cross is going to lead you someplace new – someplace we'll talk about on Sunday.

In the meantime, the question remains for us: **Are you a disciple of Jesus?**

In the meantime we will be frightened and hurting.

In the meantime we will *fail*, denying Jesus and thwarting God's intentions in our lives, hurting ourselves and hurting those around us.

In the meantime life will bring us plenty of pain and sorrow and we will at times feel we are drowning in it, not knowing how to cope, not wanting any part of it.

In all these things, we will struggle with the question, "Are you a disciple of Jesus?" In all these things we will be invited to follow Jesus, confidently or timidly, by the way of the cross. We will be invited to approach God's throne with confidence, sometimes praising, sometimes howling in our pain, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Even now, in the midst of a global pandemic, the most important question in each of our lives remains, "Are you a disciple of Jesus?" Even now, we are invited to discover the presence of God in our community, whether gathered in beautiful buildings or speaking one by one across scratchy phone lines.

We can do all things, even the painful ones, even bearing a cross, because we know. This isn't the end of the story. Sunday is coming.

Are you a disciple of Jesus?

Because of the cross, because of the imperfect example of the twelve, because of the suffering of Jesus, who cried out in his own pain, we too, in our own imperfection and struggle, can say "Yes, I am a disciple of Jesus."

Tonight we come the cross. Because we know that by following Jesus, by embracing that pain, whatever it means in your life or mine, on the other side we will find Resurrection.

Amen.