

At the Crossroads ... where defeat meets triumph

Lesson: **Matthew 27:11-54**

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%2027:11-54>

Today, this last Sunday before Easter, is known by two different names: Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday. "Palm" Sunday refers to Jesus' final entry into Jerusalem, when the crowds treated him as their king. "Passion" Sunday refers to the last hours of his life; it comes from the Latin *passus* which means "having suffered". In less than a week, Jesus' life goes from palms to passion, from success to suffering.

On that day that Jesus entered Jerusalem, he was hailed as a king. Palm branches had been used for hundreds of years as a symbol of national triumph and victory, so the crowds waving the palms tell us they saw Jesus as the one who would liberate them. He was to be a political hero — the one who would overthrow the corrupt Jewish kings and the empirical Roman governors. They threw their cloaks onto the road, so that he might not soil his feet. They shouted Hosanna, a word of praise for salvation, and they prayed God's blessings upon him. And Jesus rode in — not on a stallion, of course, but on a donkey. Still kingly, in comparison to the way he had been traveling, and luxurious from a peasant's point of view. This was the acclamation accorded a military hero, an anointed king.

And then, very soon thereafter, perhaps within a few days, Jesus is arrested, summarily tried, and executed.

You want to talk about a hard week? That's a hard week.

We've been talking about the intersection of the human and the divine: temptation and salvation, brokenness and reconciliation, despair and joy. We've discovered that the intersection of the human and the divine is at the heart of Jesus — where the horizontal and the vertical beams of the cross connect. The central challenge of following the Way of Jesus is living at that Crossroads. Following Jesus means living at the Crossroads in every moment, and that is our struggle.

It's easy to lounge in the human, living from temptation to temptation, wallowing in our brokenness (or avoiding it completely), entombed by our despair. And it is impossible to live completely in the divine. This week, of all weeks, when we are confronted by the conflict of the human and the divine, we must take a hard look at that cross and the crossroads, and what it means for us as followers of the Way.¹ Today, on Palm-and-Passion Sunday, on this crossroads between triumph and despair, Jesus teaches us something special, something followable. In his last hours, Jesus teaches us how to respond when we suffer from being misunderstood, betrayed, ridiculed, or abused.

When you think of Jesus in that last week, Jesus standing at that particular crossroad, what do you see? What kind of man do you picture? Maybe you picture a warrior, silent, solo: the very buffed, warrior Jesus of Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ*. Jesus as Lethal Weapon. Maybe you see a too-obedient son, broken under the harshness of an abusive father. Maybe you see a martyr, suffering in silence. What kind of man do you see?

First: tell your truth and God's truth in love. In each of the four gospels, when Pilate asks Jesus, "are you King of the Jews", Jesus answer the truth: yes, you say so, yes. If you have the image of Jesus being silent during the officials' questioning and the crucifixion, read the passages again. Throughout his life, Jesus

¹ I want to thank my colleague Dave Stark for his perspective on this passage in Matthew's gospel, and his interpretive leadings (Dave Stark, Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, Burnsville, MN, 2005).

tells the truth about his life. He tells the truth about his God.² Jesus modeled telling the truth, and what did he say about it? "The truth will set you free."

Throughout his life, when confronted with abuse and sin and pain, Jesus named it, and called it out. It is crucial for Christians to bear witness to the truth. We have to confront untruth and injustice head on, in public, in private, in our own souls.

Most of us have to **learn** to tell the truth. I'm not talking about learning not to lie, although many of us could use help with that. Telling the truth is about disclosure, honest sharing, openness, trust. For many of you, speaking honestly is new. Telling your truth is new, and it feels unnatural and dangerous every time you do it. You have been taught that it is better to be agreeable than to risk discord. You have learned that goodness and faithfulness are about silence. But truth-telling is about naming your experience: your struggles, your abuses, your pain, and your longings, your hopes, your joys. In this church we talk about the "demon voices" – about those destructive voices from your childhood that still echo lies in your head. Simply speaking the truth to the demon voices is new for many of you – and sharing your God's-honest-truth with another, even with God, is almost beyond imagining.

When we put limits on the truths we allow ourselves to name, we put limits on the power of God in our lives. Let me say that again: when you limit your truth, you limit God's power to work in your life. You limit God's power to work in the world. God won't work against our free will: when you limit the sharing of truth, you choose where God is allowed to work. When we think "that will never change" or "I can't make a difference" or "It's not nice to speak up", we limit God's ability to act in our lives. We limit miracles. And we allow injustice and abuse to continue. And we carry crosses that simply aren't ours to bear.

Even if it feels like telling the truth will serve no purpose, change no one's mind, telling the truth destroys the power of the lie. When you tell the truth, the shame of the burden is destroyed. By speaking the truth, the cross loses its dominion. It loses its power. It loses its shame. When lies are being told, we are shamed by them. When we tell the truth, we relieve the weight of the lies. We let the God who is so much bigger and stronger and greater than we are carry that burden for us. When we tell the truth, we let God be God.

How many of you are bearing shame placed on you by others? How many of you let those demon voices tell lies about you, to you? How many of you live out those lies, because confronting them feels unnatural, and dangerous, or not nice?

If you are living with current abuse – verbal or physical or emotional abuse, whether you are abusing others or taking it on – please know that silence and lies never end it, and your martyrdom and love and shame will not end it. You need to tell the truth to someone you trust, or someone who is trustworthy, even if you don't yet trust her or him. If you are living with voices that abuse your soul, that keep you believing you are less than the whole and holy child that God created you to be, you **need** to tell the truth

² See also: Mark 15:2-5: "Are you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate. "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. The chief priests accused him of many things. So again Pilate asked him, "Aren't you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of." But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed.

Luke 23:3 So Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied.

John 18:33-37 Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" ... Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place." "You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

John 19:8-11 When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid, and he went back inside the palace. "Where do you come from?" he asked Jesus, but Jesus gave him no answer. "Do you refuse to speak to me?" Pilate said. "Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?" Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin."

about that. Confession and disclosure are critical to our faith walk. We **need** accountability and support partners — people we can share our truths with.

Jesus does not want you to bear shame or abuse. That cross has already been borne by someone much more able to carry it than you. God in Christ loves even you, and there is nothing you can do to change that. And God never intended you to be diminished by your defeats, or by your silence.

That said, there will be times when you will suffer. There will be situations that need to be walked through, dealt with, or confronted. Avoidance is never the right answer, though leaving a situation of suffering may be. So how do we know when to walk away, and when to walk through the pain? Jesus could have escaped. He could have left the garden where he was betrayed, or left Jerusalem, or stayed back in Nazareth. How do we know when the suffering is part of doing the right thing? How did Jesus know to go to the cross?

Jesus went to the cross only after a period of real discernment, consisting of three basic steps.

First, he prayed. Not just a little, not just a passing salute to God's dominion. He didn't just pray as the cross was getting planted in the dirt. His prayer life was constant, thoughtful. Asking for God's guidance was part of his daily life. And when it became clear to him that his path would lead him to the cross, Jesus got down on his knees and prayed until his sweat came out like blood. And he asked others to be with him.

Second, Jesus asked God specifically if there were another way God could work out God's purpose. Could Jesus redeem the world another way? "Take this cup away from me." "Let this cup pass from me, Father."

Third, he had already told the truth. He had told it to his disciples, to the political leaders, the religious leaders. He had told it to anyone who would listen, over and over again. He told the truth until they had absorbed it, or were no longer listening.

When we are faced with difficult and painful situations, Jesus shows us what to do. Pray for God's guidance. Ask for God to show us a better way to fulfill our purpose and achieve God's intentions. And tell the truth: our truth as we know it, and God's truth, as it has been revealed. Following Jesus is not an exercise in masochism — in suffering for its own sake. We are called to endure suffering in following him only after we have spoken, prayerfully considered all options, and prayed for guidance.

God will bring good even out of suffering. When we look at Jesus, and all he endured, we see that even with that horror, that terrible fate, God brought great and extraordinary goodness out of it. God removed the barrier between the human and the divine. God broke the power of time and death. God showed us the way to new life, whole life, holy life, even in the midst of human life.

One more thing: when we must suffer, when there is no way past the pain but through the pain, Jesus shows us that we may, in fact we must, cry out to God in our anguish, and anger, and despair. My God, my God, why have you forgotten me? As you endure the suffering your life will give you, cry out to God for strength, for encouragement, and for the unconditional, unimaginable love that only God can give. Cry out, reach out, and let God love you through anything that is bigger than you are alone. For at the crossroads, there is triumph, for there is purpose. There is power. There is love. There is resurrection, for you, for everyone.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, our beloved brother and our savior, you asked your Father and God to help you avoid the pain. You asked for another way. And when it became clear that you had to go to the cross,

you turned your life over to God. You asked that God's will, and God's eternal and gracious purpose be done in your life. What can we say but "thank you."

Thank you for bearing the cross, and for giving us the way to new life in our own lives now, and in the life that is to come. Thank you for teaching us that martyrdom is not your way. Thank you for showing us that revenge and spite are not your way. Thank you for teaching us that your way is through knowing and telling our truths again and again. God, there is someone in here who needs your guidance right now. Listen to that longing heart, Lord. Reach out and take that person's hand and guide him or guide her through that pain. Bear the cross for him, for her. Lead us into joy. Lead us into your new life of joy and peace. Lead us beyond the cross into your resurrection hope. All this we ask you in the assurance of your perfect and unconditional love for us. Amen.