

“A Man of Few Words” **Mark 15:1-15; Isaiah 53**

I finally looked at my 401(k) the other day. That was a mistake. Of course, the bad news doesn't just affect me. Since I won't be able to retire until I'm about 85, you're going to be putting up with me for a long time.

Now, if we could take ourselves out of the personal stake each of us has in the economy, which we can't, but if we could, we would find this a very interesting situation. The psychology that drives the market and economic activity often has little to do with reality. The constant drumbeat of bad news creates a fear that shrinks our pocketbooks and drives the Dow from 14,000 to 6,500.

But this fear is not predicated so much on economic facts but on a feeling of helplessness. We are afraid. We have quit spending and investing because we no longer believe we can control our finances, our future. The economic assumptions, the normal patterns of spending and investing, are no longer consistent with the rules we believed controlled the economy. So, we are fearful because we are not in charge of our money or see anyone in whom we have the confidence to manage the situation.

Look at the poor banks. At first, the idea was that TARP money was going to banks that were strong enough to weather the economic storm. So, if you were a bank, you wanted the money to illustrate the government believed you would definitely survive. Now, there is a perception by some that you take TARP money if you need shoring up. Local bank CEOs have to be a little schizophrenic.

Or, when President Bush appointed Henry Paulson to get us out of this mess, I thought it was a good choice because he was a long term participant in the industry and knew what he was doing. Come to find out he was as clueless as all the rest of us.

I'm appreciative that President Obama and his financial team admit the fact that nobody knows for certain what will work. But I'm not sure how much of this honestly I can take.

Yet, when I step back, I realize that most people still have a job. Most people did not buy more house than they can afford. There are undoubtedly problems. But it is not 1929. Yet, most of us also continue to be afraid because we cannot control events. Whether it is the stock market or the head of personnel at our company, decisions are being made that we believe are beyond our control.

Now, I bring this up because understanding how a lack of control of our lives sparks fear within us will help us understand how Jesus felt on the day we have come to call Good Friday. Like last week's sermon about Maundy Thursday, today I have once again jumped forward in the liturgical calendar. I am discussing events that occurred during Holy Week, the period between Palm Sunday and Easter.

Our passage this morning takes place on the Friday before Easter. The previous evening, what we now call Maundy Thursday, Jesus inaugurated the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. But afterwards he is arrested and brought before the religious authorities. Not possessing the power to remove Jesus, the religious authorities have dragged him before Pilate, the Roman procurator of Palestine. Seeking to understand the charges of sedition the religious authorities have brought against him, Pilate asks Jesus if he is King of the Jews. Jesus answers, "You say so."

Now, there is much scholarly debate as to what Jesus' answer signifies. Some translations record it as a "yes." But others argue the original Greek words do not really express a positive or negative answer, more of a "that's what you say."

After this, the religious authorities detail a litany of charges against Jesus. Jesus responds to none of these. And Pilate, undoubtedly accustomed to the accused vociferously proclaiming their innocence, is amazed that Jesus makes no reply to the accusations.

The gospel writer Mark then tells us Pilate was accustomed to releasing on Passover a prisoner of the people's choosing. There is no record in any ancient document of Roman procurators doing this. But that does not mean it didn't occur.

The crowd present, likely a small group there in the courtyard, begins to press Pilate for this accommodation. He then gives them the choice of Jesus, whom he characterizes as King of the Jews, or Barabbas, a man who was part of an insurrection in which a murder took place. They choose Barabbas.

Pilate, realizing the religious authorities are driving these decisions, asks the crowd what they want him to do with Jesus. And the crowd shouts, "Crucify him!" So, Pilate releases Barabbas and sends Jesus to be crucified.

There's a story of a woman who was Christmas shopping with her two children. After many hours of looking at row after row of toys and hearing both her children asking for everything they saw on those many shelves, she finally made it to the elevator with her two kids. She was feeling what so many of us experience during the holiday season: overwhelming pressure to go to every party, every housewarming, taste all the holiday food and treats, getting that perfect gift for every single person on our shopping list, making sure we don't forget anyone on our card list, and the pressure of making certain we respond to everyone who sent us a card.

Finally the elevator doors opened and there was already a crowd in the car. She pushed her way into the elevator dragging her two children and all her purchases with her. When the doors closed, she couldn't take it anymore and exclaimed, "Whoever started this whole Christmas thing should be found, strung up and shot!"

From the back of the car everyone heard a quiet calm voice respond, "Don't worry, we already crucified him." For the rest of the trip down the elevator it was so quiet you could have heard a pin drop.

It is easy to forget that the condemnation, torture, and crucifixion of Jesus are an essential part of the Christian story.

One of the reasons the study of Holy Week, the seven days between Palm Sunday and Easter, remains so important is that it balances our theology, our view and understanding of Jesus. Most of the time we concentrate on the divinity of Christ. We are drawn to him walking on water, healing the sick, pronouncing sermons filled with great moral and theological truths.

In contrast, Holy Week starkly reminds us of the humanity of Jesus. Betrayed by his friends and followers, manipulated by the religious authorities, unjustly convicted, beaten and cruelly executed by the Romans, these events accentuate the humanity of Christ. When we seek the Jesus who understands *our* fears, *our* struggles, *our* defeats, we are drawn to the events of this week.

Judas betrays him. The religious authorities fear him, but have not the power to execute him, so they create false charges and bring him to Pilate. Our passage gives a sympathetic tinge to Pilate. But historically, we know Pilate was a cruel man who despised the Jews, regarding them as a stubborn and rebellious people. Today, we meticulously study this event because Jesus is a central and important person in our lives and our culture. But in the day this took place over 2000 years ago, it was a fleeting moment contemporary historians did not even notice.

The sympathy we see in Pilate was likely driven by his disdain for the local authorities. He could discern they wanted rid of Jesus, and just to show who was in charge, Pilate made it more difficult for them. So, it really wasn't about Jesus. The trial of Jesus got caught up in local politics.

And this, we understand. So often when our lives are spinning out of control, we feel caught between competing elements that possess no sympathy or even interest in us.

Disease strikes randomly and without warning.

Our jobs are driven by economic factors beyond our control.

The struggle between competing office bosses denies us a promotion.

Our marriage goes up and down depending on our spouse's ex-husband or wife.

All the anti-alcohol, anti-drug, anti-sex talks to our children fall on deaf ears.

We have the needed grades and SAT scores and still didn't get into the college of our choice.

That day, Jesus' life or death stood at the whim of a man he had never met, a man who was more interested in the politics of the moment than what could happen to Jesus. When we ask ourselves whether Jesus understands our situation, our human struggle, our feelings of helplessness, this moment in his life reminds us he knows our pain because he experienced it.

There is a legend about a Cherokee boy's rite of passage. One day at dusk, his father would take him into the forest, blindfold him and tell him to sit on a stump and remain there for the whole night, not removing the blindfold until the rays of the morning sun shined through it. The young boy could not cry out for help to anyone. Once he survived the night, he would be deemed a man. He could not tell the other boys of this experience because all young Cherokee males had to come into manhood on their own in the same manner.

The boy, naturally, would be terrified. He could hear noises of all sorts. Wild beasts must surely be all around him. A human might even come along to do him harm. The wind would blow the grass and earth, and shake his stump, but the boy was forced to sit stoically, not removing the blindfold. It would be the only way he could become a man.

Finally, after a horrific night, the sun would appear and the young man could remove his blindfold. Only then would he discover that his father was sitting on the stump next to him. He had been at watch the entire night, protecting his son from harm.

Good Friday reminds us that Jesus is watching over us, cognizant of our fear and our pain, because he experienced the same struggle.

When we read this account of Jesus' appearance before Pilate, we find ourselves on two different sides concerning the participants. It comforts us to realize that Jesus' experience assures us he understands our struggles, our pain, and our fear. But we also stand on the side of the religious authorities, Pilate, and the crowd that urged crucifixion.

From their perspective, the religious authorities and Pilate had good reason to fear Jesus. Jesus was a dangerous man. He had the ear of the people. If he desired he possessed the power to provoke a rebellion, both politically and religiously. Jesus was challenging many of the current patterns of faith and culture. His treatment of women, his outreach to ethnic groups like the Samaritans, his view of the inherent worth of each individual all called into question the religious and political structures of the day. For those in charge, whose livelihoods, stature, and self-worth depended on the current religious and societal structures and prejudices, Jesus was a threat to their way of life.

And in the same manner Jesus threatens each one of us. Fair wages and benefits for our workers threaten our extravagance. The cry for peace dampens our feelings of superiority. The demand for love and forgiveness strikes at the heart of our prejudices and self-righteousness. Jesus is as dangerous to us today as he was to the crowd 2000 years ago. That is why we work so hard to water down Christianity. Like the participants that day, we fear the change Jesus demands in our lives.

In his book, The Case for Faith, Lee Strobel quotes Peter Kreeft as saying, "On my door there's a cartoon of two turtles. One says to the other 'Sometimes I'd like to ask why God allows poverty, famine, and injustice when he could do something about it.' The other turtle replies, 'I'm afraid God might ask me the same question.'" For those who choose to follow Christ, our lives will be changed.

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Pilate was amazed that Jesus did not rapidly come to his own defense. Yet, Jesus did not need to say anything. Everyone involved knew the truth. They only had to decide what they would do with it.

This morning, we stand in Pilate's and the crowd's shoes. We know the truth. The love and sacrifice of Jesus Christ calls us to a life of love, forgiveness, generosity, humility, and service.

That morning in the courtyard the crowd was presented with the choice of salvation by violence through Barabbas, or salvation by God through Jesus. They chose Barabbas. Today, who are you choosing?

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