

Really, Jesus?
Psalm 46 and Colossians 1:11-20
The Reverend Mary Kathleen Duncan
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Colossians 1:11-20

¹¹May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully ¹²giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. ¹³He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. ¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Whenever I hear the words of Psalm 46, I am back in the home of John and Verna Gessaman in 2014. They were parishioners of mine in North Carolina and John had just been diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer and his prognosis was grim. We had gathered around their mid-century modern dining table – I was at one end, John at the other, with Verna and their children flanking him. On the way over, I had racked my brain about what might bring them comfort at this time, what was appropriate? John and Verna were both elders in the Presbyterian church. Their son, Kurt, and daughter in law, Haley, were very active at a Presbyterian church in Charlotte. Their daughter, Lea, had recently converted to Judaism. And she and her husband Fry were there. I, by no means, wanted them to feel left out. I wanted to share something that would bring comfort to all. What would be an appropriate Scripture for this family? Psalm 46 came to mind. Being that it's from the Hebrew Bible, it is a text that Jews and Christians have in

common. I pulled it up on my phone and began to read aloud. The gravity of those words and that situation has remained with me since. Over the nearly two years that John lived with cancer, I visited them regularly. We'd sit on the bright sunporch and have tea or relax into the mid-century modern chairs in the living room and watch the world go by. And the beautiful thing about John and Verna is that they did not hide their suffering from me. Their grief, their anger, their vulnerability. It was a lesson for a young pastor. John died in the spring of 2016. And while I haven't seen Verna in quite some time, I think about John often and I still keep in touch with her, even though we've both moved on from eastern North Carolina. Never did I think that I would find myself in John's shoes.

Most of you know that I had cancer. At age 35, I was diagnosed with Stage 2, Her2 positive breast cancer. I have no family history of breast cancer and I was otherwise very healthy at the time of diagnosis. Most of you know some of my story, but you don't know all of it. The part you may not know, is the depth of suffering. For the entire summer of 2021, I was on a four-drug chemo regimen – Carboplatin, Taxotere, Herceptin, and Perjeta. Every three weeks, I would go to the top floor of the cancer center on Faris Road and a nurse would access the chemo port on the right side of my chest. Over the course of 6 hours, I would receive doses of each drug that were strong enough to kill the cancer growing in my body. The nurses who administered my drugs were in all kinds of protective gear because the drugs they were administering are toxic. I did well on chemo in that I had a complete pathologic response and it cured my cancer. I did poorly on chemo in that it completely wiped out my immune system, caused me to lose my hair, zapped all of my energy, and made it difficult to eat and hydrate properly. For months I would move from bed to couch, couch to bed, praying for the hours to pass by so that I could check another day off the calendar. I read books I don't really remember and consumed television shows at a rate not normally humanly possible. Nothing tasted good, not even water. Nothing felt good, not even hugs. It was awful. Really, really awful. I had mouth sores and nosebleeds, bowel issues and rolling nausea, hot flashes and joint pain. With each cycle, I hoped the side effects wouldn't be as bad, but they were. I missed an entire season of life with my family. And my bed became my safe space - where I would retreat, where I would rest, where I would pass the time. I distinctly remember one night, when I was just lying in bed and staring at the sage green wall of my bedroom. I was praying that the minutes would pass quickly and it would soon be bedtime. I was praying that I would be able to sleep through the night. I was praying that this

would all be over. I heard my husband, David, come into the room and he walked into my line of sight. And as he gathered laundry from the hamper to wash, I said it. I didn't even lift my head from the bed. I couldn't believe I was saying it, but I was. With tears in my eyes, I looked at David and asked, "Do you think Jesus really suffered this much on the cross?"

In that moment, in those hard moments of 2021, I wanted to cling to the words of Colossians 1. Or the words of Psalm 46. I wanted to cling to them and live them out. I wanted to be strong and certain in the face of suffering. I wanted to be that young woman at the head of the dining room table, so confident in her ability to comfort those entrusted to her care. To comfort herself. But I couldn't. I wasn't. I believed in God, I never wavered in my belief in God, but I found little comfort in the words of Scripture. I did find comfort in questioning Scripture, in questioning God. I did not find relief in my traditional ways of praying, but I did find a new way to pray when I opened the book of Lamentations and phrases like "the Lord has become like an enemy" and "my groans are many, my heart is faint" and "laid in ruins" popped out to me.

When you picture Jesus, what does he look like? Do you picture Jesus? Take a moment and let an image come to you... When I picture Jesus, I picture him near the cross. And I picture him with the crown of thorns on his head. Always, this is how I picture him. I might begin with an image in my mind – Jesus healing the hemorrhaging woman, calling Zacchaeus down from that Sycamore tree, teaching his disciples with a grapevine resting in his palm – but I always end up with Jesus near the cross, crown of thorns pressed into his head. Two weeks ago, I was in Chicago for that ill-fated game my Tigers played in South Bend and I got to visit the Art Institute of Chicago where they have an extensive collection of Impressionist art. I was in heaven. I could look at the works of Pissaro and Monet, Gonzales and Manet all day. I never get tired of them. They lift up my soul. While there, I came upon a work by Manet titled, "Jesus Mocked by the Soldiers". Of course, this sermon was on my mind. What I was going to share. What this Sunday means liturgically. What my texts were. This is what the description of this 1865 work says, "For this monumental painting, Eduard Manet depicted Jesus Christ at the end of his life, beaten and awaiting crucifixion. He wears a crown of thorns that mocks him as "King of the Jews," while guards hand him a reed "scepter" and drape him in a purple cloak. Manet, who painted very few religious subjects, transformed this sacred narrative into a gritty drama that marries realism with theatricality. Shown without a halo, Jesus

glows against the dark background. Is he a holy being emanating divine light or a real man posing under a studio spotlight?

The painting caused a scandal in its own time for precisely this ambiguity.” When Manet painted this masterpiece, was he asking,

“Really, Jesus?
Who are you?
Was it really that bad?
Did you really suffer?
What does it mean for us?”

This is not a kingly image of Jesus. There are no jewels or servants or colts to ride upon. There is no adulation or opulence or livery. Jesus is powerless. The soldiers mock him. The crown of thorns they crafted mock him. The scepter made from reeds mocks him. A purple cloak that attempts to cover his naked form mocks him. He had to have been humiliated, right?

When have you ever seen or heard of a king being humiliated? Maybe in a movie when he then has the offender punished or thrown in prison or slaughtered? Think of all the attention that has been given to the British monarchy this fall. Never did the Queen look “unqueenly” before her death. Never did the royal family not look perfectly polished and royal at the various ceremonial events, the lying-in-state, or the state funeral. And Charles III looked every bit the part of a king at his Accession ceremony with a gilded throne behind him. He was confident. The crowd’s attention – which was filled with former prime ministers and other national leaders – was upon him. Video cameras zeroed in on his face and the flashbulbs of dozens of cameras went off. Citizens waited outside St. James’ palace to greet him. His heir, William, and his consort, Camilla, along with the Archbishop of the Church of England stood on either side of him. It was a picture of royalty, power embodied.

The Accession of Jesus looked a bit different. For his accession took place on a cross, with a crown of thorns upon his brow. Here is an account of the crucifixion from Matthew’s gospel -

Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, ‘You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.’ In the same way the

chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, "I am God's Son."' The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'This man is calling for Elijah.' At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.' Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.

What kind of king is this? He couldn't even save himself. In this account I see no power, no glory for this "first born of all creation," nothing that marks Jesus as better than a common criminal like the ones on his left and his right.

As I've let that question accompany me and even haunt me over the past year and a half – "Do you think Jesus really suffered this much on the cross?" – I've come to understand his kingship in a new way. Because this broken down and stitched back together person in front of you doesn't need King Charles or Queen Elizabeth, Cleopatra, or Alexander the Great. She needs a king like Jesus. Who did not turn away from suffering. Who knows what it is to suffer. Who was humiliated and mocked. Who felt abandoned and alone. Who lets you ask the question, "Really, Jesus? Was it really that bad? Do you really know what it is to be human?" This is who we remember and celebrate and orient our lives toward this day. As we prepare for Advent and a baby born in a manger, we worship the king of kings who looks like no earthly king we've ever known and who is not crowned with precious metals and jewels, but rather a twisted and gnarled crown of thorns.

Here's a question for us to ponder as we prepare to enter the season of Advent, the season of waiting. We're all waiting on the king of the world to be born, poor and in a borrowed stable. But we're also waiting on a host of other things, some of them collective, some individual. Waiting on an acceptance.

Waiting to find love. Waiting on the results of the pregnancy test. Waiting on peace.

Waiting for a purpose. Waiting on a diagnosis. Waiting on our lives to start.

Waiting on our lives to end. So as we wait, let's wonder together...

Is Christ all things at once? The suffering servant who is betrayed on the cross, the ascended king who is risen for us, the cosmic Christ who was there when the world came into being. Because that's what I see when I hold these texts at the same time – the description of Christ from Colossians 1, the ever-assuring words of Psalm 46, and the sobering account of the crucifixion. Because if he is not just a king like all the other kings, then I can get on board. Because that's a king to whom I can ask the hard questions. That's a king who knows the depths of despair. That's a king who is benevolent and kind, understanding and vulnerable. That's a king who is worthy of my worship and my feeble attempts at faith. That's a king who can hold our hopes and holds all the things – my broken body and your broken home. Their biggest fears and his shame. Her deepest desires and their overwhelming anxiety. That's a king with real power – heavenly power. Godly power.

A week or so ago, I had a meeting over coffee with a church member. And we were talking about life and faith. And she asked me, "Does it make me a weaker Christian because I question God?"

"No!" I said, as I leaned toward her and reached out my hands. "Not at all! I think it might even make you more faithful." And then I told her the premise of this sermon today. I was still working it out at that point. And I was nervous about sharing that question that revealed my own doubts. Because you see, questioning the power of an earthly king should make me nervous.

But questioning the power of the heavenly one? It shouldn't make us nervous at all. For this is the king who died for us, rose for us, suffered for us and suffers with us. This is a king who can take our hard questions, our wonderings, and our doubts and answers us with vulnerability and love. Thanks be to God. Amen.

