

The Sunday of the Passion - March 20, 2016

Luke 22:14 – 23:56

The Rev. Carenda Baker

We are gathered together today to enter again into the crucible of the Divine – human story, the Passion of our Lord in which Jesus accepts voluntary suffering, accepts being “done unto” – handed over to human authorities. And yet even in the face of the worst, he chooses to act – up until his very final breath - from a place of redeeming, self-giving love. Jesus’ passion, his desire to do God’s loving will, collides head-on with the exercise of human, earthly power in all its many faces. Every single person in the Passion story has choices to make and some sort of power – as individuals, and also collectively, as part of a religious, political, and social system. Each of us is called to find our place in this story, to examine our own responses when our passion meets power, especially as this world understands power.

Luke’s account of the Lord’s Passion begins with the disciples, who, even while they are sitting at the table with Jesus, are jockeying for power, wondering who is the greatest among them. Jesus’ words to them? “It’s not about your status. *IT’S NOT ABOUT YOU*. It’s about your willingness to serve others”. Jesus specifically cautions the outspoken leader among the disciples, Peter, not to overestimate his own spiritual maturity, his leadership capabilities, the strength of his own willpower and self-assuredness. The Adversary is already at work to scatter the disciples, even as the time of severe testing is bearing down upon them.

As he has done throughout his whole life and ministry, Jesus goes to God in earnest & intimate, heart-rending, gut-wrenching prayer about what lies ahead. “Father, I don’t want to drink this bitter cup full of suffering. Please take it away. Yet I want to do your will. Show me your will. Give me the strength moment by moment, whatever comes, to do your will.”

Moments later, Jesus is greeted by Judas, and the power of intimacy – shown by a kiss - is used to betray the Lord. The crowd is right there close behind Judas, armed with clubs and swords, come to take Jesus away. One of Jesus’ followers defensively lashes out, swings his sword and maims one of the enemy. “No more swords”, says Jesus, and he touches and heals the wounded enemy.

Jesus has been handed over by Judas. He is now marched off to be handed over to Pilate for a hearing. In the meantime, Peter at least follows, at some distance, waiting in the outer courtyard. And then two trials unfold, one for Jesus, and one of Peter. Peter is questioned by strangers about his relationship to Jesus. This is scary and dicey business. For all intents and purposes, Peter is alone here with strangers and his own conscience. He has difficulty blending in with the crowd. Three times he denies that he has any connection to Jesus. In fear for his own life if he admits his connection with Jesus, Peter denounces the one with whom he has so intimately been living, learning,

loving, and ministering. The cock crows, and the Lord catches Peter's eye. Peter has failed the discipleship test, and he melts, weeping in shame.

At Jesus' trial, which isn't really a trial, but rather a hearing of trumped up charges laid out by the religious leaders and authorities, we glimpse the malevolent power of the religious system to maintain its control. The religious system is not beyond playing politics, as the leaders appeal to the desire for law and order of the ruling Romans, who do not look kindly upon malcontents. So, whatever it takes, whatever is most expedient to remaining in control, to cement their shaky case against Jesus, they will and do use.

Pilate does not really want to deal with this case. So far as he can tell, this man has committed no crime. Pilate does not want the responsibility of judging him, so he hands Jesus over to Herod, whose jurisdiction Jesus is from. Herod is glad for the chance to finally meet Jesus; he has heard so much about him. Herod is looking forward to seeing Jesus perform a miracle, something spectacular, but Jesus refuses to do spiritual tricks, even while Herod mocks and taunts him. Disappointed, Herod sends Jesus back to Pilate.

Twice more, Pilate tries to dissuade the crowd, tells them there is nothing Jesus has done that deserves death. Hoping to appease them, he offers to flog and humiliate Jesus publicly to make the point that he needs to cease and desist with his activity that is keeping people stirred up. Pilate **WANTS** to release Jesus, tries to do it. Pilate knows what the right thing is to do. But in the face of public pressure, in the face of what this might mean for his political career and the fallout of an unpopular verdict, in the face of a crowd getting angrier, louder, and more insistent in their demands, Pilate caves, and hands Jesus over to the people to do what they intend - crucify an innocent - and by all accounts - powerless man. The crowd has been successfully played - their fear and discontent fanned into frantic searching for an outlet, a scapegoat. Is this sounding at all familiar?

All the remaining witnesses to these events: Simon of Cyrene, the women followers who walk alongside Jesus keeping sorrowful company, the two criminals crucified on either side of him, the attending soldiers doing their duty, the centurion standing watch, and Joseph of Arimathea taking Jesus' body from the cross to lay it in the tomb - everyone in this story has the power to make some response to Jesus, and they all do.

The events of this final week of Jesus' life, his journey to the cross will not allow us to be bystanders. We may stand at a distance as witnesses, but we cannot remain unaffected by what we see and experience. We, too, have power, and will respond to Jesus in one way or another.

Taking on the huge risk of incarnation, God handed Jesus over to humanity, and he became completely vulnerable to all the ways life acts upon us: through love, rejection, disease, unforeseeable events, beauty, companionship, betrayal, cruelty, death.

In his final hours, Jesus exercises the only power which remains for him - the power to forgive his enemies and all of humanity - all of us - guilty of resisting and missing the mark of living out God's loving, non-violent way. In his final hours, Jesus exercises the

power he has to heal and save the precious relationship with a criminal outcast who calls out to him for mercy and compassion. And finally, Jesus exercises the power of intimacy through prayer, as in trust, he surrenders his spirit to the One to whom he has always turned in life, and now in death, his Abba, Father. With an utterly undefended heart, Jesus “lets go and lets God”. “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit”.

While our names aren’t recorded in Scripture, this is our defining story. We are all participants in this Divine – human love story of passion and power.

At one time or another, our responses to Jesus have been no different from those we heard in the Passion narrative. Persistent concern about our position and influence. Driven by fear of change and resistant to new life, new ways. Going along to get along with the loudest and angriest voices. Not doing the right thing out of cowardice – even when we know the right thing to do. The potential hidden in our hearts to wish harm, to do harm, even violence to others when we feel threatened. Denying our connection to the poor, weak, broken and most vulnerable ones in this world. Being lukewarm in our discipleship – walking among the “establishment elite” by day, and tentatively living as a would-be, wannabe disciple by cover of night. Becoming cynical and bitter toward God at the life circumstances we have been dealt, refusing in our willfulness and pride to accept God’s compassionate presence and strength. We know, as does God, our fractured intentions and our mixed motivations as followers of Christ.

In his dying, Jesus shows fully God’s purpose for the world – forgiveness, compassion, and reconciliation. Jesus’ entire life has been shaped, changed, and sustained through prayer. He has learned to turn to God, to dwell with God and be drawn ever nearer his Father’s heart of love. It is from that place, Jesus’ heart still beating in one with God’s, that in his dying, Jesus’ act of self-emptying brings healing, salvation, and new, transformed life to you and me, to the whole world.

We will probably never be able to answer the question “Why?” for all this suffering, why such Divine love. It is enough to know for whom this wondrous love is poured out. It is for us. Forever, God will be **for us**. Of this there can be no doubt. God’s passion is us. The journey of Holy Week will ask each of us to answer whether God is ours – our passion, our home, our heart’s true desire. Do our passion and our power truly and completely rest in, rely on, and serve God?

Together, pilgrims, we will walk & pray on, to see once more what Love can do. To watch again and wait for what Love will do. For us. And in us.

Amen.