

Christ the King Sunday 2019
Colossians 1:11-20 and Luke 23:33-43
November 24, 2019
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What is your favorite Bible story? It's a question regularly coming off my lips as a pastor, parent, and Vacation Bible school teacher. My daughter would answer with Jesus's feeding the 5,000. A few weeks ago Paige talked Queen Esther, a strong woman who saved her people. I love John's prologue, with its poetry, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." These stories speak of nourishment, miracle, and mystery.

What is your favorite piece of scripture? I have asked the question countless times and never in my memory has anyone answered with Jesus' crucifixion. We gravitate to the stories of victory, healings, bravery, and devotion. Not defeat, agony, and humiliation. How hard it is to turn again to the scene of Jesus nailed upon the wood, soldiers rolling dice at his feet and gambling away his clothes, while religious leaders taunted him to show his power by escaping from his death. How hard it is to look at Jesus, stripped of clothing, bloody, bruised, and slowly dying next to two condemned criminals, one of whom also derides him. Jesus is an outcast among outcast. We read this story on two occasions: each Good Friday and then here, once every three years, on Christ the King Sunday, the final Sunday of the Christian year.

I certainly am among those who would not rush to name this story as one of my favorite ones. I hesitate amid the shame, taunts, rejection and cruelty. Through the years I might well have confessed I don't really like the cross. I don't like it because it is a story of suffering; intense bodily suffering. And more than that, it is innocent suffering. Jesus does not deserve his condemnation. The fact is written into the scene: This man has done nothing wrong. It is hard to witness suffering of any kind; to see the effort etched across the forehead and weight carried upon the shoulders. But innocent suffering creates a protest of its own character: the death row inmate wrongly convicted, the child abused by a caregiver, the family caught in the crossfire of war. They did nothing wrong, we protest. With those words we enter a space where the world does not make sense, where all is stripped of logical consequences from sin and punishment, effort and success, and instead violence is visited upon those who had nothing to do with it.

I do not like the suffering of the story; nor I do I like Jesus' response in the face of it. As Luke describes the scene, Jesus appears accepting of his fate; helpless, perhaps, to it. The previous night's scene in the garden, when Jesus prayed, "Let this cup pass from me," is behind him. On this day, he does not object to his treatment nor speak words of defense as he is mocked, derided, and spat upon by his tormentors. It is like the moment when the worse that can happen actually does happen . . . and God lets it be so. What kind of God is this?

I want the God of the prophets – the God who punishes the wicked and smites down those who mock God. I want the God who wipes away every tear and brings into being a world where no women weep at the foot of cross. If I can't have this all-powerful, mighty God, then I want the caring, gentle God glimpsed in elements of Jesus' ministry: the God who welcomes children, notices a bent-over woman and straightens up her well-being, the God who tells disciple not send anyone home hungry. I am looking for the compassionate God who reaches out and reaches in – to heal the sick, fill the table, and make every crooked road of this messed-up world straight.

I don't like the suffering of this story. I don't like the helplessness of Jesus. And I don't like how accurately this story portrays the world we live in, two thousand plus years later. The cross speaks a truth I would rather than admit. God came into this world, full of love for humankind and seeking our love in return. God left the throne and found a manger, emptied himself of the palace finery and walked the earth as a poor, wandering peasant. And we killed him. God came among us and we put God to death.

How many times have we done the same to God's messengers through the centuries? We have killed many whose embodiment of Christ proved too threatening. Oscar Romero, shot while celebrating communion. King, killed while preaching of the dignity of God's brown-skinned children. And we continue the pattern in countless small ways: crafting a world where taunting overpowers truth-telling, cruelty outshines kindness, and greed overrules generosity. The cross speaks the truth of this unredeemed world: Jesus may have lived a servant, sacrificial life of love, but we prefer violence, in all its forms.

The cross speaks of suffering, helplessness, and the world's rejection of Jesus. And yet not only do we read it at the endpoint of the year, but we hold it as the hinge point of our faith, the moment when despite the taunts of saving himself, Jesus was making the pathway of our own salvation, our own redemption as children of God.

I grew up avoiding the stories of Jesus' crucifixion. It was pretty easy to do because human nature prefers success to sacrifice, victory to defeat. The first time I really listened to the Passion narrative happened in the first year at my first church assignment, when the Good Friday service featured three voices reading the story. I remember getting drawn into the drama's escalating tension until suddenly the events were too painful, too revealing and I instinctively pulled away. Even today, while listening to it read again, I still shake my head at the logic of God, entering our midst as a vulnerable baby. How, God, I think, did you not notice the risk of such a choice, the pain and fickleness of the world? Haven't you paid attention, God, to the simmering violence, hatred, and jealousy that make up our days?

And then I encountered a problem I could not solve; a condition in which I felt innocent, helpless, and at the mercy of a heartless world. The only route available was to suffer through. To feel, at times, ashamed, ignorant, and outcast. Here in this

painful, helpless place I could sense Jesus' presence. The mighty God who out-powers others was not relatable in my weakened state. The gentle God felt incompatible with the ugliness on display, or limited consolation. What I longed for, and needed, was the God who is crucified alongside us and for us. Here on the cross I found Jesus's prayers, trust and will as a solid place onto which to grab hold, and to slowly find meaning, hope and love.

In the crucifixion, writes James Smith, "God condescends to inhabit and absorb the mess we have made of the world." God chooses to endure evil in order to overcome it. As we inch to the end of 2019, a year bombarded with bad news, a year filled with anxiety, unrest, its own taunts and inquiries around truth, its own set of innocent suffering ones who wonder if a helpless, suffering God can actually save them, we have beside us our Savior: a God who has gone all the way down to the very worst the world can deal out. We have the God who has endured death in order to absorb the mess and to make a way for us to live in faithfulness. May we be made strong with all the strength that comes from his cross, and all the hope that bursts through his promise; you will be with me in paradise.