

Friday, April 18, 2025

Good Friday

Isaiah 52.13—53.12; Hebrews 4.14-16, 5.7-9; John 18.1—19.42

St. Gregory's, Long Beach

Service Live Streamed at:

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“Boldness”

Our liturgical commemorations for Holy Week are bracketed with an extended reading of the Passion Narrative. On Palm Sunday, also known as Passion Sunday, we hear the Passion Narrative from one of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, or Luke, depending on the year). This year it was Luke. Then, on Good Friday, we always hear the Passion Narrative from the Gospel according to John. While the substantial facts of the narratives are the same, there are differences (aside from the timeframe reported). I specifically refer to differences in how the actual Passion is portrayed: Jesus' arrest, the trials before temple authorities and Pontius Pilate, and his crucifixion.

Comparing the Synoptic accounts (primarily Luke) with John's version of the Passion reveals some stark differences. Not so much in the chain of events and details surrounding those events. After all, these are reported by different people viewing events from different perspectives; and even then, based on second-, third-, or fourth-hand accounts. So differences in reported details are understandable. And generally speaking, they are all consistent. With one significant exception. That is in how Jesus comports himself throughout his Passion. How he behaves and particularly how he responds, throughout. That difference is telling.

All the Narratives have the chain of events that is Jesus' Passion begin in the Kidron Valley after his final meal with his disciples. Specifically in the Garden of Gethsemane. It is obvious in all the Passion accounts that Jesus knows what is going to happen. That he will be arrested, tried, and executed. The Synoptics report that Jesus' response as he prepares for his fate is to pray, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done.” We are even told that “an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength,” and that “in his anguish, he prayed more earnestly.” Certainly not a sign of willingness on his part. More a sign of resignation. That while he is willing to do what needs to be done, he really does not want to go through with it. Something I'm sure we have all experienced at one time or another in our lives.

It is then that Judas arrives, leading the temple police to Jesus. Pointing out who he is by going up to and kissing Jesus. To which Jesus responds: “Judas, is it with a kiss that you betray the Son of Man?” A sorrowful response, tinged with a sense of being dismayed that Judas would do this. He knew he would betray him, but to do so with a kiss?

John's account of these same events is actually starkly different. Jesus does not pray to have this all go away. It's as if he is ready to meet his arrest head-on. Which is precisely what unfolds. When the temple police arrive, before anyone can say anything, it is Jesus who takes charge of the situation, asking almost defiantly, “Whom are you looking for?” And when they say, “Jesus

of Nazareth,” he strongly and confidently responds, “I am he.” And then, when Peter tries to protect Jesus, he tells him to stand down: “Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?” A firm expression of willingness to go through with what is about to unfold. The complete opposite response to what is portrayed in the Synoptics.

This strong, confident, even defiant demeanor continues on throughout Jesus’ subsequent trial. At his trial before the high priest, the Synoptics report Jesus as being a bit tentative in his responses to those taunting him. “If you are the Messiah, tell us.” To which Jesus responds, “If I tell you, you will not believe.” Whereas John’s account reports Jesus responding to similar questioning with “I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in the synagogues and in the temple . . . I have said nothing in secret.” Rather than demur in hopes of leniency, presenting a defiant, self-assured presence of those who seek to condemn him.

We see similar behavior in the trial before Pontius Pilate. The Synoptics present Jesus as being a bit conciliatory. When Pilate asks if Jesus is the king of the Jews, he responds, “You say so.” According to John, when Pilate asks the same question, Jesus again proves defiant: “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” And after more back and forth, finally responding, “You say that I am a king. For this was I born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.” A confident statement of his identity and purpose. Spoken defiantly, as if to challenge Pilate’s authority and the authority of the government he serves.

The result, regardless of who reports it, is the same. Pontius Pilate giving in to the whims of the temple authorities seeking to have Jesus executed. Jesus is pronounced guilty of the religious charges of blasphemy and of the civil charges of sedition, and sentenced to death by crucifixion. The way to the actual crucifixion again differs between the Synoptics and John. It was customary for the condemned person to carry the heavy and cumbersome crossbeam to the place of crucifixion. The Synoptics portray Jesus as weakened and struggling to carry the crossbeam on his own. At various points stumbling and falling. And in Luke’s account, soldiers forced Simon of Cyrene to carry the cross behind Jesus. John, on the other hand, makes it a point to document: “So they took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull.” Showing Jesus to be strong and determined in the face of his imminent death.

And the crucifixion itself? The Synoptics do vary slightly at this point. In both Matthew and Mark, we hear how Jesus, hanging on the cross, cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus quoting Psalm 22, a psalm of lamentation, evoking the sense of a victim; one who is utterly abandoned in their suffering. Luke does not go quite that far, yet does have a sense of resignation: “Into your hands I commend my spirit.” Yet again, John portrays Jesus as being in control throughout the ordeal. Not concerned for himself, recognizing that this was his destiny all along. Rather, he was concerned with those whom he would leave behind. Entrusting the care of his mother to John: “When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, here is your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’” And then, when the time came for his death, no crying out in agony. Merely the uttering of “It is finished.” Not so much an indication that his life is finished, but rather a statement that he has completed his work. He has completed what he

came to do. In what is about to happen, he will have succeeded in defeating sin and death. And having completed his life's work, "he bowed his head and gave up his spirit."

All four Gospels contain accounts of Jesus' Passion. The basic details, the chain of events, who did what to whom, are pretty consistent. Where differences occur tending to be more in how Jesus behaves throughout. His words and actions. Even his demeanor, particularly in the face of such a tragic miscarriage of justice. The three Synoptic Gospels are pretty consistent in how Jesus is portrayed. Exhibiting very human responses. Reluctance to go through with what he knew was to happen; resigned to the fact. Being a bit conciliatory during trial, knowing this was a fait accompli. No matter what he did, it wouldn't make a difference. And at the end, being understandably weak physically, and somewhat fragile emotionally. John, on the other hand, portrays Jesus as being very much in control throughout. In command of the situation, even as the outcome was beyond his control. Willingly submitting himself to the events that unfolded. Doing so with poise, confidence, and even with an appropriate level of defiance where warranted. Nearing the end, being sure to wrap up loose ends and providing for the care of his mother. And in the final moment, boldly declaring "it is finished." Mission accomplished.

This is not meant to be critical of the Synoptics' presentation of Jesus throughout his Passion. Their accounts have their place in our understanding of events. Particularly as a fulfillment of ancient Jewish prophecy, such as the image of Messiah as the suffering servant, which we heard in our Old Testament reading from Isaiah. "Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our disease; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted." And on a more fundamental level, recognition that this prophecy, this role, is fulfilled by one who, while fully divine, is also fully human as we are. Able to sympathize and empathize with who we are and what we experience in our own lives.

And yet, when the rubber meets the road, when we finally arrive at Good Friday, perhaps who we need is not a Messiah who is presented as more of a victim, reluctantly going to the cross in fulfillment of prophecy. Perhaps, in the midst of the tragedy and injustice of what happens, what we really need is a Messiah who confidently goes to the cross on our behalf. A Messiah who was able to act in boldness, confident in the knowledge that his whole purpose was to go to that cross on behalf of countless others. To perform the one act that could accomplish what none of us could ever do on our own: to overcome sin and death. One who went to the cross in boldness on our behalf, so that in three days' time, we might, in the words of the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, be able to "approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Just as our Lord boldly went to the cross on our behalf, for our benefit, let us, when Easter comes, boldly accept and proclaim, in our own words and actions, what he has done for us and for all humanity.