

Palm/Passion Sunday

March 28, 2021

God's Great Sign of Peace

St. Mark's Passion Story

Today is Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week. On that first Palm Sunday Jesus entered Jerusalem and the crowds cheered. But soon the cheers turned into jeers as the people demanded his death, shouting, "crucify him, crucify him." When Jesus entered Jerusalem, he knew he was on his way to the cross. But still he went. Why? Why did he go? Why did he not turn and run? Why did he not call upon God to send a legion of angels to protect him? Why did he not put a stop to the whole affair before it reached such a gruesome end on the cross? Jesus wanted, more than anything else, to bring peace to people like you and me. And that meant going to the cross.

Last year, you will recall, we read from the Gospel of Matthew and the way Matthew pictured Jesus as the TEACHER who reveals to people the will and the ways of God. Two years ago, we read from the Gospel of Luke and the way Luke stressed the HEALING GRACE OF GOD throughout his ministry.

Today we are going to read the story of the cross as told by Mark. In Mark's view the CROSS is the KEY to understanding who Jesus is, as well as the key to understanding who we are as followers of Jesus and what our mission is. For Mark, the CROSS is the key, and so today we follow Jesus to the cross.

The story of the cross is a remarkable story. Why the cross? Why did Jesus go to the cross? The story is just as compelling today as it was when it first happened. We are going to read the story today, stopping from time to time to ponder what the story is saying to us.

The story is told in chapters 14 and 15 of Mark's Gospel. Chapter 14 begins by describing what happened on Thursday evening when Jesus ate the Passover Meal with the disciples. We take up the story in verse 32. After Jesus and the disciples

had eaten,

(Mark 14:32) They went to a place called Gethsemane; and Jesus said to his disciples, “sit here while I pray.” (33) He took with him Peter and James and John and began to be distressed and agitated. (34) And Jesus said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.” (35) and going on a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. (36) He said, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.”

Jesus did not want to suffer and die! He prayed that he may not have to go to the cross, yet he was willing to do so. The question is why? What was driving Jesus to do what he did? He was willing to go to the cross because he was determined to bring PEACE to people like you and me.

(37) He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, “Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? (38) Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” (39) And again, he went away and prayed, saying the same words. (40) And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to say to him. (41) He came a third time and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. (42) Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.”

What a sight – the disciples fast asleep! They were so full of enthusiasm when Jesus first called them. They were so eager to follow Jesus. But they didn’t get it. They just didn’t get it. And they wouldn’t get it until after they saw Jesus hanging on the cross. Why is the cross so central to understanding Jesus? Why does the cross make such a difference in following Jesus?

(43) Immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; and with him there was a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. (44) Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, “The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard.” (45) So, when he came, he

went up to him at once and said, "Rabbi!" and kissed him. (46) Then they laid hands on him and arrested him. (47) But one of those who stood near drew his sword and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. (48) Then Jesus said to them, "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? (49) Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But let the scriptures be fulfilled." (50) All of them deserted him and fled.

First, they did not understand, then they misunderstand, then they turn away from Jesus. Because they did not understand what the cross was all about, the disciples did not have the where-with-all to stick it out. They deserted Jesus. They turned and ran away. What is it about the cross which makes the difference between, on the one hand, saying you are a follower of Jesus but not doing anything about it, and on the other hand, having a faith in Jesus that results in action?

(51) A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, (52) but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked.

We don't know who this young man was, but he typifies the total abandonment of Jesus by his disciples. How ironic! At one time the disciples boasted that they left everything to follow Jesus. Now this young man leaves everything in his attempt to get away from Jesus.

(53) They took Jesus to the high priest; and all the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes were assembled. (54) Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest; and he was sitting with the guards, warming himself at the fire. (55) Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for testimony against Jesus to put him to death; but they found none. (56) For many gave false testimony against him, and their testimony did not agree. (57) Some stood up and gave false testimony against him, saying, (58) "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.'" (59) But even on this point their testimony did not agree. (60) Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, "Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?" (61) But he was silent and did not answer. Again, the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?"

(62) Jesus said, "I am; and 'you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power,' and 'coming with the clouds of heaven.'"

A voice from heaven declared Jesus to be the Son of God when he was baptized and again on the mountain when he was transfigured. Peter had confessed Jesus to be the Messiah. So, it is surprising that Jesus also acknowledges that he is the Messiah. But Jesus is convinced that even his enemies will eventually recognize who he is. And they do. Pay close attention to what helps them see that Jesus is the Son of God.

(63) Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "Why do we still need witnesses?

(64) You have heard his blasphemy! What is your decision?" All of them condemned him as deserving death. (65) Some began to spit on him, to blindfold him, and to strike him, saying to him, "Prophecy!" The guards also took him over and beat him.

Not a voice is raised in his defense. Those around him even spit on him and hit him, just as the prophet Isaiah had said would happen.

(66) While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest came by. (67) When she saw Peter warming himself, she stared at him and said, "You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth." (68) But he denied it, saying, "I do not know or understand what you are talking about." And he went out into the forecourt. Then the cock crowed (69) And the servant-girl, on seeing him, began again to say to the bystanders, "This man is one of them." (70) But again, he denied it. Then after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, "Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean."

(71) But he began to curse, and he swore an oath, "I do not know this man you are talking about." (72) At that moment the cock crowed for the second time. Then Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, "Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times." And he broke down and wept.

There were actually two trials that night. Jesus was on trial, so was Peter, representing the disciples. How striking the contrast! In the one trial the Lord

confesses. In the other, the disciple denies. Peter even swears an oath that he does not know Jesus. The disciples totally abandon Jesus! Can we see ourselves in this story? When the chips are down, how strong is OUR faith? Will we back up our words of faith with action?

(Mark 15:1-5) As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. (2) Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" He answered him, "You say so." (3) Then the chief priests accused him of many things. (4) Pilate asked him again, "Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you." (5) But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.

The issue shifts from the religious to the political. But, again, there is no support for Jesus.

(6) Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. (7) Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. (8) So, the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. (9) Then he answered them, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" (10) For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. (11) But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. (12) Pilate spoke to them again, "Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?" (13) They shouted back, "Crucify him!" (14) Pilate asked them, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him!" (15) So, Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

Both trials end with mockery. The Jewish trial with the mocking of a prophet, the Roman trial with the mocking of a king. It becomes clear that Jesus has no support from anyone. The disciples, the Jewish people, the Roman leaders – they all share the guilt. But we cannot sit back and point the finger of blame at them without acknowledging our own guilt as well. This story is OUR story.

(16) Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters; and they called together the whole cohort. (17) And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. (18) And they began saluting him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" (19) They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. (20) After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

(21) They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus. (22) Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). (23) And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. (24) And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.

There he is, on the cross. The climax of the Gospel is near.

(25) It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. (26) The inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews." (27) And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left. (29) Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, (30) save yourself, and come down from the cross!" (31) In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. (32) Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

For three hours Jesus is mocked. He is mocked by those who passed by. He was mocked by the chief priests and scribes. He was mocked by the criminals who were crucified with him.

(33) When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.

No human being shows Jesus any sympathy in his first three hours on the cross. In the next three hours nature itself is plunged into darkness.

(34) At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The abandonment is complete. After three hours of human mockery and three hours of nature's gloom, Jesus cried out with words the of Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have YOU forsaken me?" Jesus is ALL ALONE.

(35) When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah." (36) And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." (37) Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. (38) And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.

God's response to the cry of Jesus from the cross is described with stunning abruptness by Mark. The moment Jesus dies the curtain of the temple is torn in two from top to bottom. No longer will people come to God through a temple built with human hands. From now on they will come to God through a new temple, the temple of Jesus' body. This is how PEACE comes to people like you and me, through Jesus and his death on the cross.

39 Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

For the FIRST time in Mark's Gospel a human being identifies Jesus as the son of God. And what is it that leads to this striking confession? The CROSS is THE SIGN!! The CROSS reveals the true identity of Jesus and the ultimate mission of God... Abandoned by the disciples, betrayed by Judas, denied by Peter, accused of blasphemy by the priests, rejected in favor of a murderer by the crowd, mocked by the religious leaders, by Roman troops and by all who came to the cross, surrounded by darkness, and forsaken even by God, in this one dramatic moment Jesus is fully known and vindicated. There is PEACE again between God and human beings. The way to God is complete.

Why the cross? Why was Jesus willing to go through with the suffering and the agony of the cross? Because God wants to be the LOVE of your life! Because there is no greater LOVE than the LOVE which God has for YOU.

It happens through the cross. Only through the cross can we understand who Jesus is. Only through the cross can we understand what Jesus came to do. Only through the cross can we understand who we are as followers of Jesus. Only through the cross can we understand what OUR MISSION IS. The cross is the key. Jesus brings peace to people like you and me through the cross. OUR MISSION is to proclaim that PEACE to all people. So, Listen!! The CROSS is GOD'S GREAT SIGN OF PEACE!

But wait! The STORY is not over. There is more to say about the cross and there is more to say about our response. So, come with us this week and let the story unfold. Come with us this week and meet the LOVE OF YOUR LIFE!!