

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd
Palm/Passion Sunday
April 5, 2020

Looking Through the Lens of Faith

Matthew 26:14-27:66

There are two sides to every story. Sometimes there is an obvious side and a hidden, not-so-obvious side. There are times when we need to put in a bit of effort to catch a glimpse of another perspective. When it comes to Bible stories, we might need to use a different lens altogether to help us see the “story behind the story.”

That’s especially true when we view the events of Holy Week. When we first encounter the story of that week, we might mostly notice the pain, loss and anguish that Jesus experiences. Our heart goes out to him as he encounters one heart-rending challenge after another. The story is filled with sorrow and loss. But as Christians, we know that there is much more to this story. This story, so central to our faith, compels us to look through the lens of faith to discover not only the evil that is at work but also the hope and grace that can be discovered.

There is the evil of those who are plotting to capture Jesus and finally silence his voice. There is the heart-wrenching loss of faithful disciples through betrayal and denial. There is the long, painful journey that leads to the Cross. Yes, there is that side of the story.

But there is another side as well. It is a testament to faithfulness, to hope and to God's grace and presence weaving through a shroud of despair.

We know that by the time Jesus sat down at the table in that upper room, there were forces conspiring against him. A series of events had begun that would lead to his arrest and to a sham trial and brutal death.

But ... when the disciples shared the Passover meal — that celebration of release and freedom and new beginnings — they were breaking bread with God's Son, who had already transformed many lives. Along with the bread and cup, the disciples received a reminder of Jesus' compassion for the people of God. Nothing could change or take away from this part of his story:

- He had restored sight to the blind.
- He had healed lepers, shared meals with tax collectors and sinners, and brought new life to Lazarus and an unidentified little girl.
- He had inspired listeners by describing the compassion of a Samaritan and urging them to love their neighbors with that same unrelenting compassion.
- He had instilled hope with his story of a loving father's welcome of a prodigal back home, and in so doing, he revealed God's eternal forgiveness.

The enemies of Jesus tried to portray him simply as a rule-breaker and someone who had come to upend the status quo. But the accounts of his

compassion and wisdom could not be silenced, despite the best efforts of those who wished to harm him.

On the one hand, we could think of that table gathering with his disciples simply as the final supper of a condemned man. But we need to look again so we can see Jesus gathering with his disciples to celebrate Passover and the ancient truths of God's faithfulness. Together they ate, sang and prayed as they praised God who hears the cries of his people, who listens and cares, who doesn't want his people to live in any kind of bondage and who had promised to send a Savior, a leader to bring his people into freedom and new life.

Together they rejoiced in the story of the blood of the lamb that protected and saved the people of God. Jesus had a choice about how he would spend the final moments of his life, and he chose to host a meal that would be passed down through the centuries as a celebration of new life and hope.

The story of Holy Week could be described as one of treachery, fear and hostility plotting against Jesus, the Prince of Peace. Yet the other side of the story portrays Jesus the faithful preacher and teacher who refused to be defined or intimidated by this lack of acceptance. He continued to live his life of welcome, hospitality and inclusion. Jesus would not allow the evil plans of some to prevent him from sharing final moments in communion with his disciples.

An outsider might only see the dismal human failures of the disciples who fell asleep, failed to speak up and, at the time of Jesus' arrest, ran away. But when we look closer, we witness Jesus pointing to God, who offers them forgiveness and who can envision a new beginning for them, even when all they see is a dead end.

An uninformed listener might only hear Judas' mocking tone — "Greetings, Rabbi" — as he placed a kiss on his doomed teacher's cheek. But as Christians, the other side of the story shines through as we witness Jesus refusing to respond with violence. He halts the disciples' urge to fight. He does not give in to fear but rather places his life in his Father's hands. We might be dismayed by the disciples' lack of fortitude as they "all deserted him and fled," yet we can celebrate the quiet steadfastness of Jesus, who refused to back down.

Some might say that Jesus was a failure as he stood silently in front of his accusers. Yet Jesus knew that he did not have to respond to their false charges. He knew he would soon be "seated at the right hand of power" and only needed to wait for his Father's perfect timing.

The story of the Passion is filled with gruesome losses and agonizing pain. It is also the story of Jesus' refusal to be swayed by human events, even when those actions took him to the Cross. It is a story of death, but not of despair, as it finally offers the revelation, "Truly this man was God's Son."

The spectacles of faith are not rose-colored glasses. Instead, they are lenses that enable us to view the story with the eyes of a believer. Palm Sunday urges us to look beyond the obvious and discern that God is at work among us, often in mysterious ways.

The same can be true when we look at our own lives and the world around us. At times we can only see one side of our story. Perhaps we, like Jesus, have been let down or even betrayed by friends or loved ones. In such a moment, it is tempting to allow that to color our outlook on the entire world. It may be easy to believe that no one merits trust and that risking involvement in friendships or relationships is simply not worth the effort.

It may be that we, like Jesus, have seen all our hard work apparently crumbling in front of us. Perhaps we didn't get that job we hoped for, maybe we are experiencing profound loss and grief, or maybe it feels that God is unreachable or silent especially this year as the world faces the Coronavirus Pandemic and we ask ourselves, "where is God?," and "What is God up to in all of the uncertainty we are facing?" Everyone's life brings with it moments of profound disappointment and discouragement. There will be days, or even weeks, when we can't see a way forward. We may be tempted to be discouraged and imagine there is no reason to have hope. Sometimes we experience "Good Friday" moments in our own lives, when it seems that much we have counted on has slipped away. There are times in our own lives when we want to cry out to God, who seems to have forgotten

us. We, too, experience despair when events mount up and seem more than we can possibly handle.

The powerful account of Holy Week reminds us that Jesus looked his betrayers and accusers and even death itself right in the eye. He experienced profound despair. And then he discovered his Father in that place of sadness and sorrow. God had not abandoned him.

When we find ourselves in that dark valley, we can remind ourselves that we are not alone. Jesus went on that path before us. When we feel alone, we can remember that Jesus knows the way through this difficult terrain. He can help us navigate the uphill battles of our lives. We can pray for the wisdom Jesus had in order to see another side of our story. Yes, Jesus goes Ahead of us even in these confusing times.

In those moments that could lead to despair, we are asked to look through the lens of faith so we can recognize the faithfulness of our loving God. We can look forward one week and see God's amazing victory over everything this world throws our way.

Be safe, be strong, be faithful and continue to pray just like Jesus prayed knowing that God's love is ours today and every day. Amen!