

Matthew 27:27-54

This is a hard story. This is a hard story to read, to hear, to preach on, to think about. Honestly, how do we do this. Its Palm Sunday after all. We come here today expecting to hear this story of a triumphant Jesus. The Jesus we expect to hear about and meet today is given the hero's welcome into Jerusalem. It seems like people finally understand who Jesus is, and what Jesus has come to do. The people are finally welcoming Jesus into Jerusalem in the way that we would expect. And then we socked with today's story. Instead of hearing of this glorious entry, we hear of a horrific act that would seem to spell defeat.

Today, instead of hearing the story of people yelling "Hosanna", we hear the story of people yelling mockeries and hurling insults. Instead of robes and coats being spread out in front of him to protect Jesus from the dust and dirt, we hear of the soldiers draping a robe over Jesus' bruised and broken shoulders. Instead of our expectant hearing of Jesus' glory, we hear them making Jesus a joke, taunting Jesus. And it gets worse still, this mocking and taunting goes on even more.

We would expect this kind of reaction from the soldiers, they know Jesus as a trouble maker, someone who resists their government. And we hear taunting and mocking from another group we would expect. We go on to hear that the high priests, the scribes, the elders all parade past Jesus and point out that fact that he saved others yet can't seem to save himself. They shove our face in the fact that Jesus healed the sick and the blind and even that Jesus raised people from the dead but he can't manage to pull himself down from the cross and prove them all wrong. It seems like they, the ones that have been against Jesus from the start, have finally won.

And then the third group comes. It would seem at this point that we've moved away from Palm Sunday and from crowds who shout in favor of Jesus. We leave those images far behind. The third group, the crowd of those who pass by and even those who are in the same boat as Jesus, the criminals, shout out insults. They just keep piling it on and adding to what Jesus and we have already heard. This story just gets harder and harder to hear.

And, dear friends, just when we think we can't hear anymore, we realize something. It was easy for these groups to turn against Jesus. It was easy for them to move away from being the people who praised and glorified Jesus to the people who mocked and taunted him instead. And dear friends, as hard as it is to admit, we can and do place ourselves in their shoes. Because once we realize how easy it was for them to deny Jesus, we begin to see that it's easy for us too. Now admittedly, we may not and usually don't take it to the extremes of mocking Jesus to his face, but still, how often do we disobey or turn away. How easy is it for us to think that what Jesus has taught us doesn't really matter? How easy is it for us to fall back into our patterns of sin? Dear brothers and sisters, it's easy, I get it, we all do this.

But before we get too down in the dumps, let's look at this passage a little harder. Because for as much despair and sadness that we hear in this story today, we still hear a message of hope. As hard as it is for us to hear a story of Jesus being bullied and tortured and die, we can't stop here. Yes, it's hard to hear Jesus cry out and question God and God's presence and to feel abandoned. But at the same time, let's reframe this. How many times have we felt bullied? How many times have we maybe felt like God had left us stranded and abandoned? How many times do we question God and what God is up to?

Here in Jesus' words of "why have you forsaken me?", we hear our question too. Here is where Jesus is really present in our reality, in our world. Here Jesus enters into our pain, your suffering. Here is where we really see that Jesus isn't some high and lofty figure but is instead more like us than we think. Jesus feels our pain too.

Jesus is present and we soon hear that God is now too. Shortly after Jesus breathes his last, we see that the curtain of the temple is torn in two. This is the curtain that separated the presence of God from the people, this is the curtain that only the High Priests could go behind at certain times, this was the curtain that divided us from God. But now this curtain is shredded, its destroyed, that divide is gone. It seems like maybe just as Jesus cried out to God, so too does God cry out to us and say, "enough, this isn't what I want anymore, what I want has been done and now know that I am present with you". Jesus dying on the cross takes away any divide that we might have from God. Jesus dying on the cross points out to us that it's not what we do that matters, what matters is that we look to the cross and the one who is there on it. What matters is that Jesus has taken away that divide and the God came to you. What we see in this tearing of the curtain and in the pointing of our eyes to the cross is that even though we may be the ones who deny or taunt or question, we are still the ones who Jesus died for too. We are still the ones who Jesus bled and stretched his arms wide open for. We are still the ones whom Jesus embraces and welcomes. And just like the centurion at the end of our story says, "Truly this man is God's Son!"