

Sermon – Matthew 27:11-54; Philippians 2:5-11
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
Palm/Passion Sunday – Year A
5 April 2020

“Forsaken”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Some of you have asked me if this is difficult. Preaching to an empty room, that is. This is the fourth Sunday we’ve gathered for worship online and it is odd, there’s no doubt about that. Mostly, it is difficult to be apart, to not gather together on the Lord’s day. But no, preaching in an empty room isn’t all that difficult. I don’t have to worry about whether or not people laugh at my jokes; I’m just assuming you’re laughing hysterically. It’s not hard, just different. As one Facebook meme declared, “And just like that, we were all televangelists.” More to the point, I’ve tried to approach this less like a slick production and more like *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*. Taking Mr. Rogers as my example, I try to look into the camera as much as possible and see a single child looking back at me or, in this case, a child of God. I can sense our togetherness. And hey, I get home a few hours earlier than back in the old days. So no, it’s not difficult.
2. While preaching to an empty room is odd but easy, preaching on the Sunday of the Passion, well, *that’s* challenging. A few minutes ago we were shouting “Hosanna!” to our King; now we have heard the story of his death. This King of the Jews has been crucified. His last words in Matthew’s narrative pierce the heart: *Eli, eli, lema sabachthani?* My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Jesus breathes his last. Love divine, God incarnate, abandoned and dead on the cold tree of Calvary. The temple curtain tears in two and the earth shakes as heaven and earth mourn the death of God’s beloved Son. There

isn't much more to be said beyond the centurion's proclamation: "Truly this man was God's Son." What else can one say?

3. It's not that it's hard to speak of, to preach, the crucifixion. Every act of Christian proclamation, every sermon, should be centered in nothing other than Christ and him crucified. Anyone who disagrees is either confused or trying to sell you something. But to speak today? After hearing the Passion narrative? It seems too soon. Perhaps we would do better simply to sit together, mourning the death of Jesus, lamenting that it was our sin, our death, that necessitated this act of self-emptying, sacrificial love.
4. When our words run out, however, Jesus speaks to us. This morning's reading from Isaiah, the third of the Songs of the Suffering Servant, reminds us that the Lord's anointed One has the tongue of a teacher and speaks to sustain the weary. Even and especially in the midst of death. So what does the crucified-but-not-silenced Word speak to us today? The death of Jesus most certainly happened in a certain time and place, but it speaks in all times and places in the present tense. What does the death of Jesus proclaim to us in these times?
5. Yesterday, our president warned us that there will be a lot of death in the coming weeks. It needs to be said that we could have done more, could have done better. The existence of the coronavirus is outside of our control; our response was not. I fear that our country will not simply need to mourn the deaths of many, but that we will also be compelled to lament the creation of systems and structures that were designed to be woefully unprepared. The efforts of medical personnel in these days are heroic, but they do not have the tools they need. This is our fault. We have created and enabled this reality. In the face of impending death, we confess that we are sinfully complicit.

6. There will be death. We have sinned. These twin statements are true in all times and places. What does the crucified Christ speak to us today? He reminds us that he is present in sin and death. In sin, to forgive us and set us free. In death, to bring us back to life. In his living and his dying, Jesus has joined himself to humanity, has entered into the depths of our existence. He allows sinners to judge him, to condemn him, to punish him, and to kill him. In the end, as he dies, he shouts his cry of dereliction. He is forsaken, lost. Defeated, dead. Why? Because of God's great love for us. The Lord never intended our sin or death which so disfigure this world to have the last word. Jesus joins us in our forsakenness, takes our sin as his own, and dies our death. All so that we could be rejoined to God, forgiven of our sin, and given the gift of eternal life. It's all grace. When he dies, the Temple curtain is torn in two. The ripping apart of Jesus' life reknits the connection between God and humanity. Jesus' forsakenness enables us to be found, for in his death we behold the unmistakable scope and power of God's love for us. This is true for us today. In Jesus' death, our sins are forgiven, and we are set free. Free to respond better tomorrow than we did yesterday. And in Jesus' death, we are restored to life. There may be a lot of death coming. As it does, we will mourn and lament our losses, our loved ones. But we will not give up hope, for we worship the Lord of life, Jesus Christ, in whose death the power of death has been defeated.

7. That, perhaps, is enough. Enough for today. It's not the end of the story. Death is never the end. Come back next week and I'll tell you all about it. For now, our words have run out. You may feel alone, but you are not forsaken. In the midst of sin, you are forgiven. In the midst of death, you live. We look to the Word of God, our crucified King, and we worship him and freely receive the grace of God that flows from the cross of Christ. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.