

Palm/Passion Sunday, Matthew 27:11-54, April 9, 2017, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

On the one hand, it's a familiar story. On the other hand, it always seems to shock us when we hear it. The account of Jesus' trial, his crucifixion and death are central to Christian faith. The cross takes central place in our architecture, in visual form, in our proclamation of preaching, prayer and hymn. Yet the Passion, as the whole story is called, continues to offend our senses, offend our belief in justice, and raise the ugly but all too real specter of human cruelty and inhumanity.

The overall contours of the story are well known. Jesus, an itinerant teacher and miracle-worker, announces a coming Kingdom of Heaven. His ministry attracts the attention of the authorities, from both the Temple and Romans. He is perceived as a threat to both. This kingdom of heaven includes all the wrong people: the poor, sinners, tax-collectors, prostitutes, and everyone the authorities want to exclude. Such a kingdom cannot exist side by side with other earthly authorities. Jesus is brought to trial, first in religious court and then, as we just hear this morning, in civil court. Both work together to rid the accepted and settled order from this, what? Is he a traitor? Is he a rebel? After a speedy trial Jesus is condemned to death. The method of his execution, crucifixion, is reserved for slaves and illegal aliens and rebels. He suffers on the cross while soldiers mock him and the crowds deride him. Finally, as life itself drains out of him, Jesus cries out to God and dies. The Bible contains four accounts of this same event. Most of the basic elements are present in all four; though the gospel of John is much different than the other three; Matthew, Mark, and Luke which are much more similar to each other.

But there are some differences, and these are worth noting. Each evangelist is telling the story to his own church community. Because each community is comprised of different types of people, the details are crafted to fit the audience. For example, only in Matthew's account do we hear of Pilate's wife warning her husband about Jesus. She says she's had a disturbing dream and calls him an innocent man. Only in Matthew does Pilate explicitly wash his hands of the whole matter. And only in Matthew does the crowd respond by saying, "His blood be on us and on our children." Why does Matthew choose to include these details? One possibility is to put as much blame on the religious authorities as the Romans. Matthew's church is comprised mostly of Jews who have come to embrace Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. Maybe Matthew wants to assure his community that they have truly followed in the way of God, unlike their previous religious leaders. But it must be clearly noted that Matthew is not making an anti-Jewish statement and he is not anti-Semitic. He blames the leadership, but not the Jewish people as a whole.

Another detail only Matthew tells us concerns the immediate aftermath of Jesus' death. Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the three synoptic gospels, tell us about the large curtain hanging in the Temple being torn in two. But only Matthew tells us about the earthquake splitting rocks apart and the tombs are opened and the dead arise. It seems a strange and wondrous detail. But then we might remember that Matthew begins his story of Jesus' life with a wondrous star announcing his birth. This moment of wonder brings visitors from the east, Gentiles, to worship him. Here, at the moment of his death, this other wondrous event, an earthquake, stirs a confession of faith from a centurion, another Gentile, to proclaim, "Truly this man was God's Son!" Matthew isn't simply a reporter giving out facts. He's a craftsmen storyteller who wants his readers, mostly Jews, to see that this Jesus embraces everyone, including Gentiles.

While these unique features are interesting and help us see the multi-faceted dimension of the Passion there's another point that always strikes me when I hear it. It doesn't matter if the

story is from Matthew, or Mark, or Luke or even John. It's the rather matter of fact way in which each of the gospel writers tell us about Jesus' crucifixion. Here there are no details. No actual reporting on how they hung Jesus on the cross. No description of the cross's shape. All we are ever told is the soldiers crucified him and even that often in the past tense. Why are all of the writers so matter of fact about this detail?

They don't need to report the details because crucifixions happened all the time. It was the Romans favorite method of capital punishment. It caused great suffering on the part of the condemned. And it was seen as a deterrent to crime. Though one has to wonder how effective it was by the sheer volume of crucifixions that took place.

Crucifixion was banned by the Romans some three hundred years after Jesus. It wasn't because it was thought to be too cruel a method of execution. By the time it was banned the Roman emperors were becoming Christian, or at least in name. Crucifixion was banned out of honoring Christ. But cruelty in execution still remained.

No, our gospel writers don't need to give us the details. Because everyone who lived at the time knew all too well what a crucifixion looked like, what it entailed, and how the condemned suffered. It's only later, after crucifixion was banned, that people began to believe that somehow Jesus suffered more than others who have died. We see crucifixion as particularly cruel and Jesus' own sufferings as unique or more intense. But that's not how the gospel writers see Jesus' death. His death is just as commonplace, just as ordinary, as the deaths of every other criminal or illegal alien or rebel.

If that's the case, if Jesus' suffering is like other human suffering, if his death is not unique but common to all other deaths, then we are able to identify with him and he with us. We don't need to say, in the midst of suffering, "No matter how bad this feels, Jesus experienced worse." That's not what we say. Instead, we can say, "Jesus has been here too. He knows what I'm going through."

That means Jesus's suffering is the same as the cancer patient. Alienated from others, exposed, shamed and in pain.

Jesus' suffering is the same as an American or Iraqi soldier maimed or killed by a bomb. His suffering is the same as a child whose lungs are seared by poison gas, gasping for air.

His suffering is the same as the parent, sitting by the bedside of a sick child, or who sits alone anxiously waiting the return of a wayward child.

His suffering is the same as one who has come to the end of their rope due to depression or whose overwhelming grief at the loss of a spouse seems to cut off any possibility of going on.

The cross reveals a God who does not sit high above us when we are in the midst of suffering and even death. Rather, God meets us here, in this messy, complicated, rarely predictable journey we call life. He is not far off. He is near. Right here. In the brutally ordinary event of one man, God's Son, dying on a cross. The only true sign of true hope. Amen.