

- Isaiah 50:4-9a
- Philippians 2:5-11
- Matthew 26:14- 27:66
- *or* Matthew 27:11-54
- Psalm 31:9-16

As I've been living through this pandemic with you and watching as we continue to experience this shaking of our society and our very selves in the midst of this incredible virus, and as I've been experiencing all of the ways that I've been forced to adjust and to change and watched everybody else adjust and change, as I've been watching people having to mourn differently and having so many people to mourn, seeing our country try to find the right way forward. See our leaders struggle to lead. See the way in which we are all shaken to the core. I found myself troubled by today's gospel from Matthew, because when I tend to go to the scriptures, I tend to go for some kind of uplift. When I am going through a valley in my own spirits, I tend to pick up the Psalms and I read "I lift my eyes to the hills – from where does my help come? It comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth."

It's harder to turn to the gospel and to read the Passion of Jesus, where Jesus himself is walking directly into the anxiety and fear and death and violence that you and I experience now. It's hard for us to see the kind of comfort that today's gospel might offer us because we are surrounded by all of the things that Jesus knows all too well as He Himself goes through that same kind of suffering in a place that had become, in its own way, deceased.

But as I have sat with this gospel and as I have thought through what it's like to live through and to truly be a follower of Christ, I realize that following Jesus means following Him all the way through Good Friday, all the way through to Easter Sunday. And that means that when I follow Jesus, I follow Him where I am and where He goes. And Jesus, the Jesus we meet in the New Testament is someone who takes us into the place of our troubles, takes us into the place of deprivation, takes us into the place of death, takes us into the place of disease and finds His way through it, through resurrection.

And where you and I spend most of our times trying to kind of ward off all of these things and we spend an enormous amount of energy to try to somehow cordon off these things from ever touching our lives so that we can stay safe and secure. Jesus heads straightforward into these maladies so that somehow he could show us a different way of surviving. Which is to say we don't spend all of our energy trying to keep the difficult things that we're experiencing away from us. But we learn to somehow surrender and be transformed in the midst of it.

The people who greeted Jesus on Palm Sunday said, "Hosanna! Save me!" And they wanted a kind of salvation that would bring them back to the good old days when Israel was independent, when the kingdom was prosperous, when they had the plot of land that they had inherited from their ancestors. And Jesus reveals a different kind of salvation. It's a salvation that comes through death and resurrection, through surrendering ourselves to God

and letting God do something great in our lives, which we could never imagine. Because resurrection always surprises us even in the midst of prosperity and particularly in times of adversity, resurrection is the hope that lives and emerges when we confront death itself.

So I feel prepared to preach about this passage today from Matthew. As difficult as it might be, as much as it seems to go counter to where your intuitions are going. Because I know that if I can follow Jesus here, I will see a deeper resurrection in my life and in the life of my community. And other Christians have been in this place before. Other Christians have had to follow and observe and read this gospel closely and to find in it a kind of map for their own journey to God.

And as I've been thinking about that, I began to comb through my knowledge of art and the history of art, and I remembered this incredible painting that Titian, the Italian painter Titian does in 1575. It's on the cover of a bulletin which you can get at the church Home. Or you can just look on here. And Titian paints this painting as he is himself dying of the plague in Venice. And the depiction of Christ that he has is known to us as the pietà. The moment after Christ has come down from the Cross and is being cradled by Mary before He is buried and placed into His tomb. It's as if we have just finished the gospel we have just read. You could almost see if you were the audience, you would be a little bit like the Centurion who would say truly this was God's Son, as you saw Jesus lying peacefully in His death.

And Titian has created an incredible amount of movement in this painting. You have Mary Magdalene kind of expressing the anxiety that someone feels when you're witnessing something brutal and awful and difficult. And she's moving around a lot like the way many of us are moving around. But one of the things that Titian does in this painting that makes it special, in my opinion, is that Titian, who is dying from the plague, the bubonic plague, paints Jesus, not as someone who is dying from wounds that have been inflicted by a spear or by nails or by scourging. But Jesus is depicted as a plague victim. The color of His skin, the way in which He is lying, the fact that there are no other wounds, it all indicates exactly that Jesus is a plague victim.

And Titian, who puts himself here in the picture, who is suffering from the plague, actually depicts himself as well. And he wants to communicate to the viewer that this is actually Jesus as the plague victim, because you look at Mary and she is holding on to Jesus in a way that she often does in pietàs. But instead of cradling Jesus closely, as say Michelangelo depicts Mary when he does his pietà, Mary is holding Jesus at length because she, while holding Him, is terrified.

And so Titian paints this painting and captures what it means for this gospel to be true for him as someone who is in the process of dying from the plague. And this is Titian's way of picking up on one of the verses that we will read on Good Friday from Isaiah, Chapter 53, where we read a prophecy about Jesus, "Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God and afflicted." Titian prays to Christ even though he is dying of the plague and he sees in Christ someone who has taken on his disease because Titian's skin is made clear in the painting.

And so this painting is Titian's last painting. It's also his last prayer. It's his confidence that God in Christ will somehow bear his disease for him and bring him to life in grace and peace and resurrection. And you and I have to be artists of our own. We have to start to paint within the kind of world that we're living in now, what does it mean for us to live into our death and resurrection? This is a parable that is too real for so many health care workers who have given themselves selflessly so that other people might live and be healed of this disease.

This is a moment in which many of us will know the powerlessness that Titian might have felt in that moment in which all he can do as an artist is paint this last painting in which he places all of his hopes on Christ and surrenders. Funny enough, even this painting, Titian started it and he could not finish it. He died before it was done. His own students finished it. And so for many of us, we perhaps find ourselves in a similar position where we have to simply surrender our last bits of our will to prayer and the hope that we will somehow find in that prayer the redemption that God has promised us and the answer to our prayer in a resurrected Christ.

What does today's gospel look like to you? For me, I've been finding myself thinking about the last paragraph in our reading from Matthew, that moment where as soon as Jesus finally dies, resurrection begins to break forth. The curtain of the temple is torn in two and there is an earthquake. A *seismós* is the Greek. And that *seismós* was the same word that Matthew uses to describe the storm that the disciples were in in the fifth chapter of Matthew, where Jesus comes to them walking on water, walking on waves, walking on a water earthquake, as it were. For the disciples were surrounded by a *seismós* and they were terrified.

And as soon as Jesus dies in today's reading from Matthew, there is another *seismós*, another earthquake. Which is to say to us that resurrection already begins in the moment in which we experience death, in the moment in which we experience being alone, in the moments in which we say to ourselves, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Because in that moment, because Jesus has already said it, there is a sense in which that absence of God itself has been made hallowed by the presence of Christ, no matter what happens to us, no matter what way we might say to ourselves in the context of our own lives, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? We have the confidence that Christ has already been there, and that we are truly not alone, even if we feel alone. Christ is there for us.

And Christ tasted the absence of God so that you and I could know the earthquake of resurrection, which is why the final line in today's gospel has this somewhat bizarre passage in which we learned that all of the saints that had been before Jesus, all of the holy men and women, all of the ancestors who had cared for the people, suddenly rose from the dead, began to appear in the city. Because when we're speaking about the resurrection, we're not speaking about something that's going to happen at the end of three days after Jesus dies on Good Friday. But something that is emerging even in the midst of death, we find the life of Christ coming to be.

So, again, what does it mean for you to paint a picture of this passage from Matthew?

Where do you find the contact in your life? Where do you find the call of Christ to you to follow Him through your own death and resurrection, through your own transformation, and to find a salvation that you could never imagine for yourself?

For me, it means finding out that by following Christ and surrendering to His will, I discover a new way to live and a new way to love. May you find that new way to live and new way to love.

Amen.

[End of Recording]