



Sermon for the Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
April 14, 2019
Luke 24.15—23.56

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A few years back, when I was in Hendersonville, I was walking into the Parish Hall on a Sunday morning for the coffee hour between the 9:00 and 11:15 services when a young father and his daughter made a bee-line for straight me from across the room. The Dad said “hi” and then said “my daughter has a question for you.” His cute-as-a-button, blonde eight-year old looked up and said “I want to know, why did Jesus have to die?” And I can tell you, that’s heckuva way to begin your coffee hour.

It’s probably a good question to ask, though, at the beginning of Holy Week – especially after that massively long Gospel reading we just heard. In the interest of not belaboring the heaviness we already feel at the account of Jesus’ death I will not try to offer an exhaustive answer to this question that has exercised theologians for centuries. But I would like to make a few points for us to think about during this upcoming week.

First of all, we should not pass too quickly over the very obvious reasons why Jesus had to die. Everyone has to die, including the Son of God in the flesh. When the second person of the Trinity became flesh and made his dwelling among us he really and truly became human. And being human means dying. There was no scenario where Jesus was going to avoid death.

Also, in this vein of obvious reasons, we should not ignore the fact that Jesus’ death by torture and crucifixion was a decision that we as human beings made. In the sin of our anger, hatred, and violence we responded to God’s embracing love by slapping God’s hands away through murder. I think it is especially important not to pass too quickly over this point because of the very tragic way in which some Christians through the centuries have tried to lay the blame for Jesus death on the Jewish people. We need to understand and accept that if God had become human in any human society, ancient or modern, from Timbuktu to the United States,

this violence and sin would have been the reaction. When the Gospel writers say the Jewish people did something to Jesus what they're really saying is that we as human beings did something.

Secondly, I think we ought to be careful that we do not attribute violence and rage to God. There is a theory about why Jesus had to die that developed in the high middle ages and has been especially popular among certain branches of American Christianity. This theory says that God wanted to kill us for our sins but instead he killed Jesus. This abusive, blood-thirsty God was not the understanding of Christianity prior to about 1100 C.E. in Western Europe and it was never the view among Eastern Christians in places like Greece and Syria.

Thirdly, we need to take notice of the fact that not one Gospel writer takes any lengthy space to explain Jesus' death. They simply recount it. The letters of Paul are the beginning of two millennia of thought about the "why" of the crucifixion. And in these other places in the New Testament many different images are used: sometime his death is compared to the sacrifices of ancient Israel, especially the Passover Lamb, other times his death is described in terms of rescuing humanity from darkness or evil, and sometimes it is spoken of as though it was almost just a senseless act of violence on our part.

I'll conclude by offering one piece of imagery that I find striking. It comes to us from the second chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews. The writer says that "through death" Jesus destroyed "the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and freed those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death." (Hebrews 2:14-15) In that imagery Jesus had to die so that the fearful power that death holds over all of us would be broken.

Because Jesus died and came out of death in resurrection we no longer have to fear death. Because of Jesus we know that death is not the end – it is the beginning of something new and more wonderful than we could have ever imagined. Jesus has gone ahead of us into death and passed safely through to the other side and now he bids us to follow him without fear, knowing that if we share with him in his death we will surely share with him in his resurrection.

Amen.