

Sermon Draft

Text: Matthew 27:11–54

Sermon: Palm Sunday 2023

On Palm Sunday, followers of Jesus embark with him on the Via Dolorosa, the way of sorrows. From the Last Supper to Gethsemane and beyond, the road for Jesus turns and twists its way to the cross, to death. Can we pause from whatever absorbs our life to go with our Savior on this road of sorrow, this suffering? He asks today, “Will you watch with me?” Watch with him! Pay attention! Because his suffering unfolds in ways that are unusual, in paradoxes that yield the meaning we seek anew this Holy Week.

In the paradoxes along the Via Dolorosa, we behold the suffering Christ as our Blessed Savior. It will not be an easy journey beginning this morning. Not easy, but it will be edifying and strengthening. Our faith is bolstered by our Lord in his suffering. The passion of Christ unfolds in paradox that is, a contradiction, opposed to common sense, but in fact true.

Such was our Lord's coming from heaven above. The one who is Immanuel, God with us, is born of poor Mary in humble squalor, the Bethlehem stable, of all places to find the world's Prince of Peace!

Luther put it, "This little child, of lowly birth, Shall be the joy of all the earth!" Now, scroll forward to that first Palm Sunday. Look down that road of sorrows.

We break in the morning of a journey started late the previous night. The temple guard, led by the traitor Judas, accosted Jesus in Gethsemane. They captured Jesus! What a paradox! Captured, yes! Binding our Lord's hands, his captors lead him away in the night to the abuse and injustice imposed by the Sanhedrin and its leaders, Annas and Caiaphas.

In contrast, these events of the night have another meaning. They add up to our Lord's commitment to go up to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of men. This is a paradox. Now, in the morning hours, Jesus was dragged before Pontius Pilate in the Roman garrison, another paradox.

Though he was only a minor player in Rome's grand arena of conquest and occupation, Pontius Pilate was a symbolic figure standing for Rome's system of justice. But Pilate ends up rendering great injustice upon Jesus.

Look in on those proceedings. Before this minor official of the great Roman system of justice, before Pilate who cynically cries, "*What is truth?*" stands the one who is the truth, the one by whom the heavens and earth were made (Colossians 1:16–17).

Jesus' few chosen words made it clear that even mighty Rome and certainly not this little puppet Pontius Pilate, could have no power except what was given from above. Yet, Pilate, a petty provincial official, will presume to judge his divine benefactor.

The paradox, the contradiction, the injustice, the shame of it! Jesus does not move. He is calm. The truth is never ruffled. The power of God in Christ is unflappable. The Letter to Hebrews states, "*God's Son has all the brightness of God's glory and is like him in every way. By his own mighty word, he holds the universe together*" (1:3). Jesus is in control.

He remains steady in the face of all the charges shouted against him in Pilate's courtyard. Jesus is calm, resolute. Pilate is nervous and uncomfortable. The mob and its leaders hurl insult and falsehoods against Jesus. Our Lord is not moved. The procurator, however, is frustrated, anxious, and cowardly. He hesitates. Pilate will not yield to what is right!

His wife was troubled in her dream about Jesus, this righteous man. Her pleas to her husband are disquieting. Pilate wavers. He looks for a convenient escape from the dilemma. He is caught between his own hesitancy to condemn innocent Jesus and the pressure by a bloodthirsty unruly mob crying, "*Crucify him!*" The pressure is on. The situation is tense.

The crowd grows more restless and boisterous. Pilate thinks quickly. They will cool down when they have a choice between Jesus the accused and a real and vile robber and murderer. By custom, Pilate once a year set a prisoner free.

Bring Barabbas from the dungeon! The name Barabbas means “the father’s son”; whose son this vile murderer was, is told in John 8:44, *“You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire. He was a murderer from the beginning.”*

That Jesus should be placed on the same platform with a figurehead of the fallen world, Barabbas; that Jesus should be lowered to comparison with gross sin and sinners; that our Lord should be abused when the chief elders and priests persuaded the people to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus, this is the paradox typical of our age.

But, do we make better choices? Where the choice is clear between the right and the good and the true, we fall to the wrong, the evil, the false. The choice to free the vile Barabbas was a choice to keep Jesus on the way of sorrows. The robber goes free into the city, while Jesus goes like one condemned to the cross. It is his passion. Glory be to Jesus! The innocent punished as guilty in order that the guilty may be reckoned innocent! This is a paradox.

Jesus, unjustly consigned to such suffering, frees even the robber from his sins. Even Barabbas may look to Jesus upon the cross extended and be forgiven and redeemed!

After Pilate went through the charade of cleansing his hands as if to cleanse also his conscience, he released Barabbas and turned Jesus over to the desires of the mob, having him scourged. ***“All the people answered, ‘Let his blood be on us and on our children!’”*** (Matthew 27:25). They clamored for his blood, eager to bear firsthand the guilt for Jesus. Did such eagerness turn to be a curse on them? It mattered not to the rabid crowd, so deep was their hatred of Jesus. They got their wish.

His blood is on them, not to sustain their sin of judging the Lord they had spurned and rejected, but rather for their own cleansing. They wanted nothing more to do with Jesus, but crucified and shedding his blood, he has everything to do with them. He shed that blood for the world, and they are very much part of the world of sinners. For both Gentile and Jew, for all he died! ***“The blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin”*** (1 John 1:7).

Pilate clings to his sin of injustice against Jesus when he gives the order that Jesus be scourged. The scourging broke down the body. It left Jesus severely weakened. In this weakened condition behind closed doors he endured the soldiers' sport and mockery. They throw a dirty cloak on his back. They weave from thorn brushes a crown. An old stick they thrust in his hand for a scepter. Then with mocking words, also spitting and smiting Jesus by fist or kicking him with leg or foot, they demeaned our Lord. Is not this a paradox?

Paradox, because these very soldiers, also every person of this fallen age who mocks Christ by not taking him seriously, will one day honor this Lord whom they reject and dishonor in this age.

The legs and feet of these soldiers that kicked him and hurt him shall bend and kneel low and honor him. The voices who shunned him and shun him today as if he were dispensable will confess him as the indispensable Lord and God! This Jesus, so abused, so mocked, so brutalized, shall one day be respected and honored as he is surely crowned Lord of lords and King of kings!

At length the charade in Pilate's quarters ended, and the procession from the praetorium to Golgotha began.

Here is paradox abounding. The body of the God-man weakens and folds under the weight of the cross that will carry him into the darkness of death and into the grave, and with him, the weight of our sins too. The procession stops. A man from the region of Cyrene is conscripted by the Roman soldiers to carry the cross for Jesus the rest of the way. But Jesus yet carries our sins. That is the paradox.

The Cyrenian carries heavy wood. Jesus bears the weight of our griefs and sorrows and those of the entire fallen race. Arriving at the place of execution, Jesus refused the crude and primitive wine/vinegar anesthetic. Torso aligned to the upright, arms outstretched on the crossbar, Jesus was crucified! The King of glory nailed to the cross!

By such suffering, weakness, last breath, and finally death, he exercised power like no other force in this world. That is the paradox of paradoxes.

So hateful is the mob, his own people, so strong the might of ancient Rome to do this thing, but none of the armies that ever marched nor the armadas that ever sailed nor the flying armaments that ever flew could accomplish what this beleaguered figure of the dying Jesus accomplished for us.

When our Lord, God's only Son died he defeated him who had the power of death, even Satan. The hours of his passion, his suffering, are filled with a host of paradoxes to bless all who look to him.

The darkness falls at the sixth hour, high noon, over Calvary, darkness extending over all the land. Only so, strangely enough, he shined more brightly as the light of the world, the life of the world. More paradoxes abound. Jesus cried, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" (Matthew 27:46).

Feeling the depths of God-forsakenness, he suffered so that he might bring us close to God. And when he gave up his last breath, the curtain in the temple, 6–8 inches thick, keeping all at a distance from the Holy God, was torn in two from top to bottom.

All this so that we might now have access to God for the sake of his Son, whose death made such atonement possible. Tombs were opened, the dead rising, walking away from death's grip, for now defeated was eternal death and born the new hope of everlasting life. Tremors rolled as the earth quaked, not for harm, but reverberating with celebration!

And one soldier, grasping the victory in his change of heart, was filled with awe and exclaimed, "***Surely he was the Son of God!***" (Matthew 27:54). And blessed are they this Holy Week who ponder the paradoxes of his passion!

Amen