

The Sunday of the Passion  
Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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You may know today as “the first day of spring” or liturgically as “Palm Sunday.” This day also comes with the title “Passion Sunday,” which is attributed to the fact that we read the Passion narrative today. One of the things I appreciate most about Passion Sunday is that we get a different “flavor” of the passion story each year. The taste we get of today is different from what we’ll hear on Good Friday and will be different for the next two Palm/Passion Sundays. Each biblical author takes a different approach. On Good Friday we always read the passion according to John. Power dynamics and the identity of Jesus are main things that John emphasizes in his telling. In Matthew and Mark they both draw us into the suffering, agony, and turmoil of Jesus. Luke, however, Luke is different. Luke has some distinctive scenes and phrases that can easily be missed if we’re not careful. These differences, I believe, suggest that one question Luke explores is: “how do we die well?”

As a palliative care chaplain I often worked with people on the edge of death. Each morning I’d gather with my team of providers in a hospital meeting room. In that room, papers, computers, and stories surrounded the doctors, nurses, social workers and chaplains. We’d hear the diagnosis, the plan of medical care, adjustments would usually be made to pain medicine, updates were given on the social support structures in place for the family and patient, and spiritually we’d talk about how the patient and family were coping and making meaning. Through it all there was one question we cared about the most: “how might we midwife a good death?” We had seen a lot of deaths. Some deaths were lonely, some were full of anger or resentment, some were filled with sadness or uncertainty, and yet some deaths were actually life giving.

Our passion reading from Luke today gives us a glimpse of what a “good death” might look like. There are three things that stick out to me in the passion according to Luke that are absent from our other three gospels.

First, when we hear of Jesus’ arrest today, listen carefully. We’ll hear that a crowd will come to arrest Jesus and then a follower of Jesus will pull out a sword and cut off the ear of the chief high priest’s slave. Then, only in Luke, will Jesus *both* stop the potential conflict *and* heal this slave’s ear.

As we progress through the story, Jesus will eventually be brought to Pilate for a trial. Pilate will find Jesus innocent, but the accusers will be insistent. Thus, Pilate will send Jesus to Herod. Only in Luke will we hear that Jesus is sent to Herod. We’ll hear that Herod finds Jesus innocent and sends him back to Pilate. After this exchange there will be one important sentence, that only Luke will say, “that day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies.” This is the second thing to listen for.

Finally, like all the other Gospels we’ll hear that Jesus was crucified with others. Yet, only in Luke will Jesus pronounce forgiveness on those who persecute him. Only in Luke will we hear the content of the conversation between Jesus and two criminals. Only in Luke will we see Jesus promise that this nameless criminal will be remembered when God’s kingdom comes. And only in Luke, will a Roman centurion say after Jesus’ final breath, “certainly this man is innocent.”

You see, in today’s passion reading, once every three years we get a vivid reminder of what “dying well” looks like. Here we see an innocent man – innocent according to Pilate, innocent according to Herod, and innocent to the centurion – here in Luke we see an innocent man continue to reconcile and save to the bitter end.

It’s been from the very beginning of Luke that we’ve been challenged to put our faith into practice. Luke has some harsh things to say to us. We’re challenged to really welcome all people – people of different ethnic origins, different socio-economic statuses, different

religions, different nationalities, different careers and backgrounds. Throughout Luke, Jesus is about reconciling difference and emphasizing God's abundance and grace. And so it makes sense that even to the very end Jesus would continue to bring together two enemies, even while Jesus is shackled and beaten.

It would be characteristic of Jesus that in the middle of insults flying, swords being draw, emotions getting heated, divisive rhetoric being thrown around, in the middle of all of that Jesus doesn't throw the first punch, Jesus doesn't hurl back insults, Jesus doesn't stoop down to their hatred; no, instead Jesus tells them to stop and then he brings healing.

And then even as he hangs on a cross - spikes through his wrist, struggling to breathe, dehydrated, and naked - there on the cross Jesus speaks to a criminal. A convicted, criminal who freely admits his guilt, there we hear that even the destructive actions of a criminal cannot separate Jesus from pronouncing mercy and extending paradise.

For me, Luke's version of Jesus' death *is* a way to die well. In fact, his death seems like a way to fully *live well* too. I saw this connection in what one online reviewer wrote about the book entitled "Dying Well." She wrote, "Dying is a holy time in which human beings gather together in the face of Mystery in all of its agony and joy and wonder and transcendent meaning. We can only create human community...when we are willing to simultaneously look death in the face and to remain open to the gift of healing." She says, "I closed the book more alive, more thankful, less fearful, and more curious about the prospect of the adventures ahead."<sup>1</sup>

So too, I pray that as you hear the passion story sung today you ponder the question: "what is a good death?" Is it a slave with an ear? Is it two enemies becoming friends? How about a criminal in paradise? I pray that you walk away from this holy week more alive, less fearful, more thankful, more curious about the adventures ahead, and imagining that while looking at death we might experience a full life once again. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.amazon.com/Dying-Well-Peace-Possibilities-Life/dp/1573226572>