

Third Sunday of Advent
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
Rev. Jason S. Glombicki
November 24, 2019

Well, today's gospel reading was a bit unexpected. It's strange to hear the story of Jesus' crucifixion during Advent. After all, this time of year we usually build up to Jesus's birth and we don't often talk about his horrific death. But, at second glance, the Lucian version of Jesus's crucifixion might just embody a hopeful, Advent-like character.

You see, in today's story, we don't have the blood and gore of John's gospel or the earthquakes in Matthew's, instead we have Luke's version that focuses on the public shaming of Jesus. And, as Rev. Linda Pepe reminds us, "Crucifixion was not an execution method for common criminals—it was reserved for enemies of the state. Crucifixion was saved for people the Roman Empire wanted to make examples of—people who had committed crimes like insurrection, civil disobedience, treason. It [was] why Jesus was crucified. The message sent to the commoners by a body left to rot on a cross was simple: 'Don't oppose the State (the government) or the systems of the state. Don't mess with the ones who are making a profit from those systems, cause if you do, you'll end up hanging on a tree at the edge of the city.'"¹

You see, Pastor Linda reminds us that Jesus was a political, social, and religious threat. He challenged the authority of the religious leaders. He disrupted the peace within the empire. His actions were a problem that required a swift response. A response that

¹ <http://www.theologicalstew.com/today-you-will-be-with-me-in-paradise-luke-23-33-43.html>

would publicly shame Jesus and anyone else who might feel empowered to resist the empire or challenge the established religious institution.

And, we see in today's reading that the response from the empire was working! Rome had announced its position regarding Jesus by posting an inscription that was not only intended to shame Jesus but it was also an embarrassment to all Jewish people. The soldiers, wanting to keep their jobs, conformed to Rome's position and mocked him. So too, the religious leaders scoffed at Jesus in an effort to distance themselves and reclaim some sense of righteous authority. And, even the criminal next to Jesus tried to minimize his own shame by directing other's attention toward Jesus. Everyone joined the public shaming in an attempt to blend in for their personal gain.

And, isn't that the story of humanity? We often align ourselves with whomever has power. Suddenly, our new boss is our best friend, even if we can't stand her. Wanting to be liked by others, we'll quickly throw someone under the bus to build up our own status. We try to use God like a magic genie to control the uncontrollable but overlook our partnership with God in bringing about God's justice and peace for all.

And, this is how we come to better understand the concept that Jesus took on the sin of the world at his crucifixion. Because, for Martin Luther, sin is our natural tendency to be egotistical and selfish. That is, we tend to take all the good gifts that God has given them and utilize them only for our gain and individual benefit. We take the goodness of the earth's bounty and we hoard food and resources for a rainy day, tossing away extra Thanksgiving turkey and side dishes when they no longer serve us any good, all the while almost 15% of Chicago residents don't know where or when they'll get their next meal.² So to, in today's gospel reading, the Jewish religious leaders

² <https://www.chicagosfoodbank.org/hunger-in-our-community/>

were egotistical when they colluded with both the Roman authorities and Rome's systematic manner of bringing about so-called "peace" through fear and shame. But, that's not to say that Jewish people are responsible for Jesus's death. For they happened to be the people that were around, but, as humans, this is the natural tendency of us all. And, so, perhaps, Jesus's crucifixion was less about what Jesus did and far more about humankind's tendency to preserve the systems of the world that garner money, power, and prestige for those who already have it. For, throughout all of history, our selfishness takes the innocent Christ living among us and hangs them to die.

You see, in our baptism we are reminded that all people embody the essence of Christ. So, when we selfishly demand the best deals on Black Friday, we crucify the dignity of the working poor and those enslaved worldwide.³ When we are complicit in the racial inequality that tends to wrongly convict people of color as a result of the implicit bias that they are naturally criminals,⁴ then, with that bias, we nail Christ to the cross. For, it's oh so easy to see ourselves standing at the foot of the cross, following the lead of others, as we bring shame and death to Christ living among us.

But then, out of nowhere comes a voice saying, "but this man has done nothing wrong." A voice from a condemned criminal. A voice receiving a just punishment. A person who, perhaps, incited insurrection or treason for personal gain. Yet, this criminal realizes what our Lutheran faith reminds us, namely, that if a command of a political authority cannot be followed without sin, one must obey God rather than

³ <https://www.antislavery.org/slavery-today/modern-slavery/>

⁴

[http://www.law.umich.edu/special/exoneration/Documents/Race and Wrongful Convictions.pdf](http://www.law.umich.edu/special/exoneration/Documents/Race%20and%20Wrongful%20Convictions.pdf)

human beings.⁵ So, if those in authority suppress our care for the most vulnerable of people, then we, like Christ, are innocent when our rebellion works to non-violently and ethically bring about justice for all. And, if those in authority commodify humanity, we, like Christ, are innocent in our resistance to bring about God's vision of life for all. For, in today's gospel, we find that Jesus offers paradise to the one on the sideline. To the bitter end, Jesus worked to enliven a new reign of love that was aligned with those on the edges. For, the Christian messiah does not rule with an iron-fist and military might, but rather, our messiah rules with true peace, our messiah rules with an attitude that values diversity, and our messiah rules with a vision for a world where love knows no barrier or boundary.

So, yes, today's gospel feels a bit out of place. Yet, we have a God who is a bit odd. A God who doesn't look to align with those in power because of their power, but rather our God aligns with us in the moments where we embody the paradise that God offers. For, we are freely given the opportunity to see God's presence in diverse and unexpected places. We are encouraged to discover our God in odd places, like a naked body hanging on a cross and a wrinkled infant lying in a manger. For our God promises to be among us, within us, and supporting us. So, may we have the vision to recognize God's righteousness, wisdom, and love among us in both the mundane and unexpected places this Advent season. Amen.

⁵ <http://bookofconcord.org/augsburgconfession.php#article16.6>