

A Fatal Friday
Mark 14:21-41
Passion/Palm Sunday
March 29, 2015
(Slide 1)

With the exception of a few a few shrill voices sitting way up in the nosebleed section, no serious thinker doubts that Jesus of Nazareth was a real person. And with the exception of those who like to write salacious novels and movie scripts about Jesus cheating death and then running off with Mary Magdalene to live happily (and very carnally) ever after, no serious thinker doubts that Jesus was executed under the authority of Pontius Pilate. It's a fact that people on both sides of numerous aisles readily accept. Even noted agnostics like Bart Ehrman accept the fact that Jesus was a historical person. If there is any debate, then most of it centers upon why the day we call Good Friday occurred in the first place. Questions like "Did Jesus have to die?" and "If Jesus did have to die, then who made that decision and why?" have always been part of that debate. Down through history, the answers to those questions have played an important role in understanding and shaping the Christian faith. On this Palm Sunday it would do us well to explore those questions.

Now if you have been present for worship over the past few weeks, then you know that we have looked at the week this day begins. Knowing that Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Sunday, cleansed the temple on Monday, challenged the bigwigs on Tuesday, was anointed with costly perfume on Wednesday, and prayed in Gethsemane on Thursday has helped us to gain a basic understanding of how we got to the hill called Calvary on Friday. Most of us already are familiar with the basic outline of what happened on that terrible day: that Jesus was arrested, handed over to the authorities, put through the mockery of a trial, and then brutally executed by being nailed to a Roman cross. The art that those details inspired is some of the most recognizable in the entire world. Even those who are not particularly religious know the story of what happened after Jesus was arrested in Gethsemane's garden. The "what" of Good Friday is well known. But the "why" is not. Did the events of Good Friday have to happen? And if they did, then who sent Jesus to the cross? Perhaps most importantly, do the answers to these two very important questions involve the word "God" in any form or fashion?

Well, before we deal with those questions, it might be helpful to remember another story which at first glance seems to be totally unrelated. Surely you've heard it before. The Cliff Notes version goes like this: Once upon a time was a little tattletale named Joseph. He used to get his older brothers into trouble by constantly ratting them out to their father. Unfortunately, the father made no secret of his affection for the little snitch. Once he gave him a very fancy overcoat. When Joseph paraded that fancy overcoat in front of his jealous brothers it was the last straw. Far beyond the traditional excesses of sibling rivalry, they decided to deal with the annoying little blabbermouth once and for all by selling him to slave traders. That snitch of a brother eventually ended up as a slave in Egypt. But if you are familiar with the story, then you know that this was not the end of that sniveling weasel. Through a series of quite remarkable events, Joseph soon became the second most powerful man in Egypt; the man in charge of Egypt's vast agricultural resources. Then, when famine hit the entire Middle East, the brothers came to Egypt in search of food and, unbeknownst to them, soon found themselves standing before the same rat fink of a brother they had once sold into slavery. When they finally discovered that the man with whom they were speaking; the man that literally held the power of life and death over them was the very brother they had mistreated, they had every reason to be very afraid. Yet after coolly toying with them for a while (revenge is best served cold, you see), Joseph spoke up and with perfect 20/20 hindsight said, "Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life."

Now in addition to enjoying that story, I want you to know that I fully believe Joseph's words. With all my heart I believe that this formerly self-centered twit finally had a religious "aha moment" and was now able to see how God had been present throughout his life. Yet before we turn this story into the sentimental mush it was never intended to be, we must ask ourselves this question: Was it God's will that Joseph irritated his brothers to the point that they decided to sell him into slavery? Was it God's will that he ended up as Potiphar's slave, a man who had a wife that went "Fifty Shades of Gray" on Joseph and then cried rape when he refused her amorous advances, thus causing him to get tossed in jail, which in turn, started the story of his ascent to power that ultimately saved his family from starvation? I have to believe it was not. I have to believe that it is never the will of God for brothers to sell brothers (or anyone

else, for that matter) into slavery. I also have to believe that it was not the will of God for people to toss others in prison simply because they don't get their sexual appetites met. God doesn't work that way. Yet though it is not the will of God for bad things to happen to good people or even whiney little tattletales like Joseph, this story reminds us that God can use bad things for divine purposes. Along with St. Paul, I have to believe that it is possible for all things to work together for good for those who love God. And that is precisely the reason why a little later in the story, Joseph was able say to his brothers, "Even though you intended to do me harm, God used it for good." Not that what they did was good, mind you, but that God used what they did for good. **(Slide 2)**

So based on the truths we find in the saga of Joseph and his brothers, I believe it is safe to say that it was not God's will for the events of Good Friday to happen. (Now don't tune me out just yet! Hang with me and I'll explain.) But if it wasn't God's will for them to happen, then why did they? What caused Jesus to be brutally executed? To answer that, let's go back to what to something that has already been said. Let's recap a few of the events of that week we now call Holy. You were reminded earlier that on Sunday Jesus led a deliberate counter-procession into Jerusalem. At the same time Pontius Pilate was more than likely entering the Holy City from the east in the name of his "god," Jesus entered from the west in the name of his God. Jesus' action was a deliberate challenge to the power and might of the Roman authorities. As a result, the air became filled with tension. On Monday Jesus walked into the Jerusalem's temple, the symbolic center of the Jewish faith. As he overturned the tables of the animal sellers and the moneychangers, he quoted words from the prophet Zechariah; words that said that all the religious pomp and circumstance in the world could not make up for the temple's lack of justice and mercy. Jesus' action was a deliberate challenge to the power and influence of the Jewish authorities. As a result, the tension that was already in the air increased even more. On Wednesday Jesus went to the home of Simon the Leper for a meal. While he was sitting at the table a woman entered the room and poured the contents of a very expensive jar of ointment on his head, oil usually reserved for royalty, and symbolically anointing him the king of Israel, aka, the Messiah. Jesus' actions irritated one of his own tremendously, so much so that he stormed out of the room and went straight to the authorities. As a result, the tension in the air

became so thick you could cut it with a knife. The hostility towards Jesus had grown exponentially during the first part of Holy Week. **(Slide 3)** And the fact that it did seems to point to the reality that Jesus was not killed because he told people that God loved them and that they should love each other. He was not nailed upon the cross because he taught people how to pray to his “Father who art in heaven” or because he broke the Sabbath laws and by picking and then eating grain or because he made the lame to walk and the blind to see. No, Jesus was killed because he challenged the principalities and powers of his day; because he confronted a very entrenched system. Jesus was crucified because he stood for everything the world stood against. **(Slide 4)**

But wait, you say. Don't we sing *“What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss to bear the dreadful curse for my soul”* and *“Upon that cross of Jesus mine eyes at times can see the very dying form of One who suffered there for me?”* Don't we pray *“Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who of thy tender mercy didst give thine only Son Jesus Christ to suffer death upon the cross for our redemption?”* And didn't we see that famous scene from the TV mini-series “Jesus of Nazareth.” As we recall, it was quite the thing when it was aired back in 1979. It featured the great English actor James Mason. Many of a certain age remember him for playing Captain Nemo in Walt Disney's “20,000 Leagues under the Sea.” In Franco Zeffirelli's “Jesus of Nazareth,” however, he played Nicodemus; the Pharisee that John's gospel reported once came to Jesus by night and there discovered that he “must be born again.” John also said that after Jesus was taken from the cross, Nicodemus was the one that brought the spices to anoint his lifeless body. Tradition goes on to say that Nicodemus did in fact become a Christian and that he became a leader in the early Church. If that tradition is true, then this particular scene may depict the moment that it happened. **(Slide 5)** On that terrible Friday, as he hid behind a wall down the hill from Calvary, Nicodemus looked at the dying Jesus and (in perfect King James English, by the way) mumbled words from the prophet Isaiah, “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows... he was wounded for our transgressions... bruised for our iniquities... and by his stripes we are healed.” According to that movie, it was at that moment the old Pharisee looked upon the crucified Christ and understood what so many of us have understood: that on the cross Jesus died for the sins of the world.

Now please listen to me closely now. Even though I'm only going to be your pastor for a couple more months, I don't want to leave and have you think that I'm a heretic. So hear me very clearly as I say that I can appreciate the message of that scene. I don't doubt that what happened on the cross made all of the difference not just for Nicodemus, but for you and for me. I'm in total agreement with St. Paul who told the Corinthians that we preach Christ crucified. That being said, there is no way that Nicodemus could have put two and two together and come to the understanding that Jesus' death appeased an angry God which, in turn, enabled our sins to be forgiven at that particular time in history. While there are parts of scripture that possibly hint at that idea, the doctrine known as substitutionary atonement didn't come about until St. Anselm developed it some 1,000 years later. (Slide 6) Yet even if that be the case, does the God that laid the foundations of the earth, shut the sea within its doors, and caused the dawn to hold its place; the God who formed our inward parts and knit us together in our mother's womb; the God who could make the stones shout out if needed, really need someone to die a bloody death in order to forgive the sins of the world? My guess would be "No." Even though God can take the worse and use it for the best, I am not the only one that believes that Jesus did not suffer the gruesome events of Good Friday for the sins of the world. On the contrary, many believe that Jesus suffered those gruesome events because of the sins of the world.

Perhaps you remember that when Elijah confronted King Ahab and told him that his way was not God's way, Ahab had Elijah run out of town. Perhaps you remember that when Jeremiah confronted King Zedekiah and told him that his ways were not God's ways, Zedekiah had Jeremiah thrown first into a prison and then into a deep, deep well. Perhaps you remember that when John the Baptizer, Jesus' very own kinsman, confronted King Herod and told him that his way was not God's way, Herod had his head served up on a platter. Perhaps you remember that when the apostles Peter, Paul, and James—the brother of our Lord—told the world that its way was not God's way they each met their fate by either a cross or a sword. The scriptures are filled with examples of what happens when the ways of the world clash with the ways of God; when the values of kingdom of heaven confront the values of the kingdom of earth. So when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Sunday and said that Caesar's ways were not God's ways, when he

strode into the temple on Monday and said that Annas and Caiaphas' values were not God's values, when looked into the face of Judas on Wednesday and said that his beliefs were not God's beliefs, what do you think would happen? Jesus did not die for the sins of the world. Jesus died because of the sins of the world. **(Slide 7)** And in that very real sense, you and I put him on that cross all over again whenever our ways conflict with God's ways.

But as one has written, "Jesus was not simply an unfortunate victim of [the world's] brutality. He was also a protagonist filled with passion"¹ for God's kingdom to come and God's "will to be done on earth as it is in heaven." Jesus passion—and this passion in the sense of his driving force and not of the last few days of his life—was the passion of God. His values were the values of God. His sense of justice, kindness and fairness was the righteousness of God. Jesus took up his cross long before that Good Friday morning. Jesus' fate was sealed long before he stood in Pilate's court. His endgame was set way back the day that he told his mom and dad that he must be about his Father's business. If we are about that same business; if share Jesus' passion and take up our cross, as we are invited to do, we will suffer the same. And if we do, then the words of the old hymn become even more pointed:

"Are ye able, said the Master, to be crucified with me?"

¹ Borg and Crossan, p. 161