

## **Witnessing Tragedy**

The Dark Valley: Part 6 “Witnessing Tragedy”

Rev. Cameron D St.Michael – April 10, 2022

Palm/Passion Sunday

**Readings:** Luke 19:28-40; Luke 23:1-49

**Reflection:** Psalm 118

### **Proclamation of the Entrance into Jerusalem:**

Hear from the Gospel according to Luke how our Lord Jesus entered Jerusalem.

*After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, “Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it.’” So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” They said, “The Lord needs it.” Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.” (Luke 19:28-40 NRSV\*)*

**Greeting:** Hosanna to the Son of David! Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!

**Prayer:** Almighty God, Jesus Christ your beloved Son entered Jerusalem, welcomed as a king. The branches of the palms were laid along his path by those who rejoiced at his entrance. Let those branches be a sign for us of his great victory, and as we bear those branches in his name let us ever proclaim that he is Lord. That through triumph and tragedy, we may follow him in love into life everlasting. It is in the name of Jesus that we pray this day. Amen.

**Reflection:** Psalm 118

*The LORD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous: “The right hand of the LORD does valiantly; the right hand of the LORD is exalted; the right hand of the LORD does valiantly.” I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD. The LORD has punished me severely, but he did not give me over to death. Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter*

*through them and give thanks to the LORD. This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it. I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Save us, we beseech you, O LORD! O LORD, we beseech you, give us success! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD. We bless you from the house of the LORD. The LORD is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar. You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you. O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. (Psalm 118 NRSV\*)*

We read the words of Psalm 118 and hear of trusting in God. We find salvation in the Lord through his enduring love. How do you experience God's love in the midst of celebration and triumph? How do you experience God's love in the midst of hurt and loss? Do you carry the conviction that God is with you during all of those times? How can you help others experience that love? How do we walk together in the path of Christ?

**Prayer:** Lord, we turn to you now in prayer. On this day we come before you with our celebrations as those who laid palms in the street. We come before you with the troubles of our hearts as those that witnessed the crucifixion. We look to you in all things that your steadfast love may guide and lead us. Help us in our doubts and worries and strengthen us in faith, through Jesus Christ, our faithful redeemer. May we find peace and grace through that same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

**Sermon:**

Our scripture reading for today comes from the New Revised Standard Version Bible. Hear from the Gospel according to Luke how our Lord Jesus was crucified.

*Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate. They began to accuse him, saying, "We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king." Then Pilate asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" He answered, "You say so." Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, "I find no basis for an accusation against this man." But they were insistent and said, "He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place."*

*When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. And when he learned that he was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign. He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer. The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put*

*an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate. That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies.*

*Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. I will therefore have him flogged and release him."*

*Then they all shouted out together, "Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!" (This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.) Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again; but they kept shouting, "Crucify, crucify him!" A third time he said to them, "Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him." But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished.*

*As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. But Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For the days are surely coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.' Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us'; and to the hills, 'Cover us.' For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"*

*Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. [[Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."]] And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."*

*One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."*

*It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Having said this, he breathed his last. When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, "Certainly this man was innocent."*

*And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things. (Luke 23:1-49 NRSV\*)*

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

A preface: I have rewritten this so many times that I ask for grace as you listen today. I don't recall the last time I struggled so much with trying to write a message and I hope that I listened to what Holy Spirit was saying.

With Today we come to the end of our series "The Dark Valley" and we come to that end in the darkest part of the valley: witnessing tragedy. I think it matters that today's message is one that is difficult to take in, difficult to comprehend, and difficult for us to address. Because in it we have the combination of the triumph of entering Jerusalem with the feeling that everything is going just how it should and we are then met with the travesty of the cross. An innocent man being put to death. And I have to admit this is one of the hardest sermons I have ever tried to write. And I think it's because it's so easy to get sidetracked by everything going on in our reading today. So difficult in fact, that later this year we're likely going to return to this scene a few times to talk about all of the other issues. But the thing I wanted to focus in on today is how easy it is for us to overlook the hurt and the tragedy that we have today. Because it's easy for us to look past it and to focus on the hope of everything that comes after. I think one of the things that the crucifixion reminds us of is the way that death and loss are part of the human experience. It's often easy for us to speak of the way that Christ's teachings have impacted us. It's easier for us to talk about the way that the resurrection has changed us. We can speak of what we expect in the Second Coming. It's harder for us to talk about the way that the death of Jesus of Nazareth has changed us. And I think it's because we struggled to deal with tragedy.

There's one thing I kept coming back to. I have revised this message so many times that I have truly lost count of the number of versions of this sermon I have attempted to write. The one thing that I kept coming back to was that death changes us. And I think that's something that we have a hard time truly admitting. The reason that it's hard is because so often when we face tragedy, we have it in our heads that we'll get back to normal eventually. I think that we struggle to understand the way that every loss changes us forever. We don't often like facing that truth because it means coming face to face with our own tragedies. But it's important for us to be able to face it so that we understand the way that we have to cope with loss and cope with tragedy. Because often when we lose someone, we have the sense that we're just waiting to return to normal. And that doesn't happen because some events impact us so deeply that we will never be the same.

What I wanted to talk about today is that never being the same doesn't mean that we will always walk around with the hurt and the loss as a pain that drags us down and keeps us from living. But it does mean that we address our loss and grief and understand those things

because of just how much they change our lives. It can make us question our faith. It can make us feel that there is no hope. It can make us feel like we are lost. And I couldn't help but think about all of this in reading the very end of the account that we have of the crucifixion in our gospel reading today. Because we end with a statement about those who were close to Christ standing at a distance, witnessing tragedy. In all the words we have today, it doesn't talk about their tears. It doesn't talk about their hurt. But we know that hurt is real because we can feel it when we read about what happened. About the humiliation Jesus faced. To the tragic death on a Roman cross.

One thing I have noticed is that we are always eager to move on to the resurrection. We don't often like to dwell on the scene that plays out today. And this plays out in our lives in the way that we handle the tragedies that are close to us. We may try to force ourselves to move on. We may try to force ourselves into being normal. But loss can change us in ways that we never expected. One of the things that we may find is a new normal. We are forever changed, but we this doesn't mean we are forever down. One of the ways that we deal with tragedy and loss is by admitting it, by speaking of it, and by understanding that it has become a part of us. It is then that we learn how to live. I do not have a one size fits all answer to grief. I do not have a special passage from the Bible that will fix every problem. I do not have a single prayer that will make every hurt automatically better. What I do have is this: you're never alone. We are called to be here for each other. One of the ways that we cope is by being able to openly talk about the way that it has impacted us and hurt us because that gives us a chance for it to be real and it gives us a chance to help each other in love. It gives us a chance to help each other to cope with the hurt and cope with the loss.

And so, I say this: My door is always open to you. Whatever the loss may be, whatever the hurt may be, no matter how fresh it may be, no matter how long ago it might have occurred, I am here for you. I am here to help you explore and understand the impact of that loss and that hurt. No filter required. No worry about saying the wrong thing. I am here to listen and help in whatever way I can. Because that's the example I see in Christ, over and over again. Even in today's reading, Jesus gives comfort to the criminal being executed with him. And that's what I want to encourage for all of you today. To be there for each other. Not that you have to solve the problem of hurt but to learn to be a witness for others. So that you can see their tragedy, know their loss, and to walk with them in that journey through the valley. Because you may need to carry the light. You may need someone to carry the light for you. Because when we share in that loss together, it also allows us to share in Christ together, and as we share in Christ together, we share in hope. And so, on this day when we remember grief and loss, let us open ourselves to each other. That we may help each other deal with grief and loss by reminding each other that we walk through it not alone but together. That united we find a way to walk out of that dark valley together. We walk in love together, we walk in hope together, and in Christ we learn how to live. Amen.

**Prayer of Confession and Pardon:** God, you are with us even when we turn away from you. Guide us back into your loving arms. Judge us not by the perfection of our actions but show us mercy and love. We have strayed like lost sheep from your ways, failing both in what we have done and what we have failed to do. Bring us back into your fold that you may guide us and lead us in all things. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and forgive us. May we walk in your love and trust your ways. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in life eternal. Amen.

**Offering:** If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed below. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

### **Lord's Prayer**

**Dismissal with Blessing:** May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

## **Our Current Series – The Dark Valley**

Our current series will look at the ways in which we deal with issues such as doubt and loss. How does our grief impact us? How does it impact our relationship with God? What happens in that dark valley?

### **Prayer List**

Rev Charliam Renner	Bishop Frank Beard	Our Conference	Our Healthcare Workers
Patti Corder and the Greenup Ambulance Crew		Angie Veach	Eric Veach
Ed & Verna Titus	Henry Catey	Jake Kiser	Cindy Cisney
Nancy Hoke	Don Wells	Tricia Adkins	Don Stewart
Ronnie Winstead	Dwight Parsons	Lauren Stewart	Phyllis Gable
Sage Martin	Dalton McFarland	Ruth Ann Finley	Jodie Bunch
Tom Finley	Laura Carlen	Judy McCellan	Rosie Chancelor
Susie Callahan	Kenny Holmes	Ted Marrs	Family of James Myers
Family of Roger VanScyoc	Richard Durham	Kathy Hanks	Wayne Carrell
Gary & Mary Winterrowd	Leo Smith	Bonnie Hite	Sue & Bob Smyser
Larry Thompson	Greg Williams	Eloise Buffenmeyer	Martha Roberts
Charlie & Charlotte Baxter	Paul Schulte	Darrell Quick	Mammaser Family

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