

Crucifixion Questions

Pondering Questions: Part 7 “Crucifixion Questions”

Rev. Cameron D St. Michael – October 2, 2022

17th Sunday After Pentecost

Readings: Mark 15-16 (Various); Ephesians 4:7-13; Luke 23:39-43

Reflection: Psalm 30

Greeting: Happy are those who find wisdom and understanding. The Lord laid the foundations of the earth with wisdom. Hold on to sound judgement and discretion from God. The Lord is our confidence and guard! Praise the Lord! (*Proverbs 3*)

Prayer: O God, source of all wisdom and bringer of understanding, we humbly enter into your presence. May we be blessed by your grace and your knowledge as we join together to worship you this day. May we grow in heart and mind with you, Lord. May you lift us up and strengthen us by your righteousness. Help us to be bold in our faith so that we may do your will joyfully and eagerly. May we worship you in a spirit of truth, that we may follow you all the days of our lives, through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

Reflection: Psalm 30

I will extol you, O Lord, for you have drawn me up and did not let my foes rejoice over me. O Lord my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me. O Lord, you brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit. Sing praises to the Lord, O you his faithful ones, and give thanks to his holy name. For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning. As for me, I said in my prosperity, “I shall never be moved.” By your favor, O Lord, you had established me as a strong mountain; you hid your face; I was dismayed. To you, O Lord, I cried, and to the Lord I made supplication: “What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness? Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me! O Lord, be my helper!” You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever.
(Psalm 30 NRSV*)

We read the words of Psalm 30 and hear of God’s help and restoration. That the Lord watches over us and raises us up from our troubles. That the Lord transforms our mourning into celebration and our sorrow to joy. How have you experienced God’s transforming love? How have you shared that with others? What are the stories you can share about your own experience in Christ? How can we share together in God’s grace and mercy?

Prayer: O God, your steadfast love and faithfulness have brought us together this day. Help us that we may always seek your wisdom in our lives and may we hold fast to your ways. May we share in the hope you have inspired in us and may we share always in your blessing. We ask that as we bring our joys and our concerns to you that you will strengthen us in your spirit. As you are with us in our joys and sorrows, may you lift us up in both our laughter and tears. May your light guide us and lead us to life everlasting, through 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 readings for today comes from the New Revised Standard Version Bible. Our first reading for today comes from the Gospel of Mark and we will be reading various sections of chapters 15 and 16 about the crucifixion.

As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them, and after flogging Jesus he handed him over to be crucified. Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters), and they called together the whole cohort. After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him. It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. The inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews." And with him they crucified two rebels, one on his right and one on his left. When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. When evening had come, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Joseph bought a linen cloth and, taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. (Mark 15:1,15, 16, 20, 25-27, 33-34, 37, 42-43, 46; 16:1-6 NRSV)*

Our next reading for today comes from Ephesians chapter 4 verses 7 through 13.

But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said, "When he ascended on high, he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people." (When it says,

“He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) He himself granted that some are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. (Ephesians 4:7-13 NRSV)*

Our final reading for today comes from the Gospel of Luke chapter 23 verses 39 through 43.

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 in your kingdom.” He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:39-43 NRSV)*

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

I have what turned out to be a rather interesting message for me to write this week. Partly because I was working on three different questions that all center around the crucifixion. These questions require us to look at tradition, language, and our own understanding. Each reading for today corresponds with a different question. The first question is one that I hear all the time. The question has to do with the timeline of the crucifixion, revolving around the idea of three days. “How can we count out three days in the crucifixion?” Our first reading is a recap of the timeline from Mark. I chose to read various sections from Mark 15 and 16 to give us a good summary of all the time that passes. We get that everything started on Friday morning and concludes with the empty tomb on Sunday morning. For many, this would be two days from Friday morning, not three. This can actually bother people enough to try to work out a different timeline. But it really isn’t needed. This just falls under the way that things are counted and happens all throughout the Bible. This can really distort our ideas time, but it is important for us to know how this works. For this, the crucifixion happens on day one, Friday. Everyone stays away from the tomb on the Sabbath, so Saturday marks day two. Then, the next day is Sunday, when the women go and discover the empty tomb on the third day. Now, someone might claim that this is just gymnastics to fix a problem. It’s actually the way that dating is often counted in the Bible. A great example of this is the reign of kings. It doesn’t matter when a king took power, his first year is the year he took power. His second year is when a new year starts. We often measure the first year as an exact date to that date in the next year. But that doesn’t match what we find in our ancient sources. If a king came into power the last month of the year, that’s his first year. After the new year, that begins the second year. If he’s deposed in the first month of the following year, then he was removed from power in his third year, even though he was only in power a year and two months. So, when we think about the crucifixion timeline in the same way, we can easily see how Christ was

crucified, dead and buried, and rose on the third day. Friday, Saturday, and then Sunday. And that is how Jesus rose “on the third day.”

Now, some of this relates to the Apostles’ Creed, which is where our second question about the crucifixion came from. There is a line that has caused much confusion over the years and just as much discussion. The question “did Christ descended into hell?” Now, if you were to open up the United Methodist Hymnal to page 881, you’ll find the traditional version of the Apostles’ Creed. It reads that Jesus “was crucified, dead, and buried; the third day he rose from the dead.” If you were looking there, you might notice a footnote being marked there. It has that the traditional reading includes the words “He descended into hell.” It was controversial enough that it was relegated to a footnote. Many find it to be an odd statement. I know that it confuses people because I’ve had this question asked of me more than once. People want to know both the background of that line of the creed and why it isn’t part of the main text in the hymnal. The reason it isn’t included is because it isn’t fully backed up by Scripture. We only have this hinted at, as we see in our second reading for today. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians contains a reference that gives us an insight into this line from the creed. Paul writes that if Jesus ascended then it means that he must have descended “into the lower parts of the earth.” This is actually a great help in understanding our line from the creed, but to understand it we have to understand changes in language and tradition. To simplify this, we can look at the original Latin text. You might be surprised to know that the Latin reads “descendit ad inferos” which basically means “descended to those below.” Alternatively, inferos can be translated as “the underworld.” It is worth noting here that Sheol and Hades, two of the words used in the Bible actually just mean the land of the dead. They don’t denote a good or a bad place, but simply where the dead reside. While this idea of Christ going to hell has long been a part of tradition, it has only the vaguest of references in the Bible itself. It isn’t the best of English translations. For a better translation, we can read the ecumenical version of the Apostles’ Creed on page 882 from the hymnal. There we can find the words “descended to the dead” which is a much more accurate translation. So, I suppose the answer is that Scripture doesn’t directly say Jesus descended into hell, and the original Latin itself doesn’t say it either. This is a case of tradition not always being backed up by the Biblical account. It doesn’t mean that it didn’t happen, more that we simply don’t know. I hope that answer at least allows you to understand the creed a little better.

Now, the third question about the crucifixion comes from something that’s also asked a lot. “If Jesus died, went to the dead, and was resurrected, how does the criminal on the cross fit in?” This comes from our reading from Luke. In Luke’s accounting of the crucifixion, one of the criminals that is being crucified along with Christ asks Jesus to remember him when he comes into his kingdom. Christ “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” The issue many people run into with this is how we square away the idea that it is happening “today” with the timeline that we’ve just been going over. I think one problem is attempting to put a human timeline on the divine because all we have is the way that we experience time.

That doesn't take into account how time may work differently for God. The other thing we could reflect on is that when Christ is on the cross, he dies. He doesn't rise until Sunday. So, we can know that Christ had to be somewhere in that time. His body is laid in the tomb, but he is elsewhere before the resurrection. However, this is also a great time to remember a few other things about Jesus. He's also the Word. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him." It can be easy to overlook the different ways we think about Jesus, especially if we take into consideration that he is part of a triune God. That the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three but are also one. Because of that, it opens up multiple doors for even what that statement could mean. If the thief entered paradise, in whatever way we want to define that (a discussion for another day), it would be difficult to think of a situation in which God would not be there. Because of that, I think that we really do have multiple explanations for how Jesus and the thief could fit "today" into a timeline.

I hope this has helped some. The crucifixion can get overlooked, even though it is such a central part of our faith. Often because the account comes about on Good Friday and on Easter, we are ready to talk about the resurrection. Do you have more questions about the crucifixion? I would be happy to do my best to answer them. I hope these answers have at least been helpful and informative. Because the crucifixion is such an important event, any question about it is worth trying to answer. Questions are always important so that we are always seeking knowledge and understanding so that we can grow together in God's wisdom. May we be strengthened day by day, that as we grow in wisdom, we may grow in hope. Hope in Christ, hope in life eternal, and hope in a steadfast love that endures forever. 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. Amen.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. 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 – Pondering Questions

Our series will have Pastor Cameron answering your questions! Get them to him however is most convenient for you and he will be using those as the basis for our weekly message!

Prayer List

Rev Charliam Renner	Bishop Frank Beard	Our Conference	Our Healthcare Workers
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Don Stewart	Ronnie Winstead	Lauren Stewart	Phyllis Gabel
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