

Duality: Tragedy

Rev. Cameron D St.Michael –April 13 2025

Palm/Passion Sunday

Readings: Isaiah 50:4-9a; Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 23:33-56 NRSVUE

Reflection: Luke 19:28-40

Call to Worship: 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. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord. (Psalm 118)

Prayer: Everlasting God, we thank you for the tender mercy you show to all people. We are thankful that you sent your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, to be of our flesh, and to suffer death on a cross, that all could see and follow the example of his great humility. Help us to overcome the many difficulties that we face in this life. May you always strengthen us by your Holy Spirit that we may understand and face the tragedies that we will have in this life. Mercifully grant that we can follow the example of patience and love shown to us in Jesus. May we embrace his resurrection that we may know life and have it abundantly. Heavenly Father, watch over us in worship this day. Guide us in singing and prayer by your Spirit. And help us to gather in the peace and the love of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Reflection: Luke 19:28-40

²⁸ After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. ²⁹ When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰ 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. ³¹ If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.' " ³² So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. ³³ As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" ³⁴ They said, "The Lord needs it." ³⁵ Then they brought it to Jesus, and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶ As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. ³⁷ Now as he was 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, ³⁸ saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" ³⁹ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." ⁴⁰ He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out." (Luke 19:28-40 NRSVUE)*

We read the words of Luke and we hear about Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. We hear about how they entered to the cheering of the crowds. That even telling them to be quiet would change nothing. This triumphant entry into Jerusalem is contrasted today with the tragedy of death. Sometimes things are going to well, we think they will always be great. But we still have to be ready for tragedy. How do you prepare for both good and bad? How do you

keep yourself based in prayer for both good and bad? How will you continue to trust Christ in all situations? How can you prepare yourself and others to be ready for all things with Christ?

Prayer: Merciful God, we seek your presence with us in this place. We know you are with us in the good and the bad and the unknown. Help us through the easy and the difficult, for we know that your Holy Spirit is our guide and teacher in all circumstances. Today we ask you to help us to face tragedy. For we know that we may struggle and we may falter. May these forty days be a time of reflection so that we may mend our ways and turn our faces to you, O God. We lift up our prayers to you on this day, knowing that you are always more ready to listen than we are to speak. We lift up the prayers that we voice together and the prayers we keep deep within our hearts. May you guide us, lead us, and strengthen us so that we can face whatever tomorrow may bring. May we remember you in our mourning and our dancing. May we find you in our weeping and our laughter. And may we always remember that whatever we face, we always face it together with your steadfast love and faithfulness. Bless us and keep us that we may walk in the ways of 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 come from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition Bible. Our first reading is from Isaiah chapter 50, verse 4 through 9.

⁴ The Lord God has given me a trained tongue, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens, wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. ⁵ The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious; I did not turn backward. ⁶ I gave my back to those who struck me and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. ⁷ The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; ⁸ he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand in court together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. ⁹ It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty? All of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up. (Isaiah 50:4-9 NRSVUE)*

Our next reading is from Philippians chapter 2, verse 5 through 11.

⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human, ⁸ he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God exalted him even more highly and gave him the name that is above every other name, ¹⁰ so that at the name given to Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5-11 NRSVUE)*

Our final reading is from Luke chapter 23, verse 33 through 56a.

³³ 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. [³⁴ Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for

they do not know what they are doing.”]] And they cast lots to divide his clothing. ³⁵ 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!” ³⁶ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine ³⁷ and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” ³⁸ There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”

³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” ⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹ And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” ⁴² Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom.” ⁴³ He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

⁴⁴ It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, ⁴⁵ while the sun’s light failed, and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶ Then Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Having said this, he breathed his last. ⁴⁷ When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, “Certainly this man was innocent.” ⁴⁸ And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. ⁴⁹ But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance watching these things.

⁵⁰ Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph who, though a member of the council, ⁵¹ had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. ⁵² This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. ⁵³ Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. ⁵⁴ It was the day of Preparation, and the Sabbath was beginning. ⁵⁵ The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. ⁵⁶ Then they returned and prepared spices and ointments. (Luke 23:33-56a NRSVUE)*

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

On this Palm/Passion Sunday, we look at tragedy as part of our two-part duality series, and our focus today is on the crucifixion. There is this roller coaster ride of emotions as a reminder of just how quickly things can go from good to bad, how quickly things can change. Because we began with our triumphant entry into Jerusalem. People spreading branches and coats on the road, the people celebrating with so much noise that they couldn't be silenced. It ends with Jesus being laid in a tomb, following his execution. There's an element of tragedy that I think is hard for us sometimes to wrap our heads around. Because it often does come swiftly, and often tragedy blinds us to any good there may be, because it's so hard to see past the difficulty and the heartache. I often think it's because we are coping with things that have happened that really show a contrast to the good. I think it can be difficult when we face grief in this way, because we are not prepared, and the shadow it casts overshadows everything.

In this case, it's the shadow of death that clouds our vision and makes it hard to see good, because all we can see is pain and suffering. And that can be really hard for us. It can be hard for us to follow, because we see all of that pain, and we're not sure what to do with it. I think it's difficult because of the fact that we hear so many things that hurt in this account. We

see Jesus being treated so poorly, being reviled, being misunderstood, being mocked, and it's hard to watch that. And it's difficult because we see it as an attack on all that is good. We wonder how people could hate someone who showed so much love and care. And I know a big part of that answer is fear. Fear often drives us to make bad choices. Fear drives us into tragedy's arms, because fear keeps us from seeing love and seeing hope. That when we hear from Isaiah that the Lord sustains the weary with a word, it's hard to hear that word when you're afraid of everything. It is hard for us to know that Jesus emptied himself of everything just to be spat upon. And part of that tragedy is knowing that people don't see what's really going on, they see what they're meant to see. And that's part of what happens when things get dark. People see what they want to see. They see what they expect to see. Not how things are, but they let their fears and their hatred guide them.

But we do get some bright spots in the middle of this that remind us that even in the midst of tragedy, there is hope. Part of that hope is what we read in the midst of all of this sadness and sorrow is a little story of salvation. Because Jesus is crucified with two criminals, one on his left and one on his right. And one derides him, but the other sees an innocent man. And even as he himself is being executed, he turns to Jesus and asks for salvation. He hopes that Jesus will remember him. Jesus says he will. And this may be one of the most startling showcases of that radical love that Jesus has. Because we don't get all the things that we're often told need to be present for forgiveness. We at least don't see them outwardly. We see this criminal recognize an innocent man and he asks that he remember him in his kingdom. Jesus hears his plea and he says that he will remember him. Maybe it was that Jesus hears him admit that he did do the crimes he was convicted of. Maybe it was that he defended an innocent man from others. Maybe Jesus knew something about this man's heart. But Jesus acknowledges this man and says he'll remember him. I think that's part of the immense impact that we get in the midst of all this tragedy. There's this brief exchange of two dying men. And in the midst of all of this tragedy, a small sign of hope.

I try to hold on to that hope. Because I'm reminded that always in the face of tragedy, there is still something good. The world can be a scary place. And I'm sometimes reminded of something that Mr. Rogers once said. That in difficult times, we look for the helpers. We look for the people trying to do what is right and help others. And we can see them in our scripture today. Jesus on the cross is still offering hope to those who seek salvation. Joseph of Arimathea laying Jesus to rest is trying to do the right thing for Jesus. The women who did not run but stayed to see him laid in the tomb are there. They are trying to be a witness to his last moments. The centurion recognizing Jesus' innocence. One of the things that I wanted to think about is how we face tragedy ourselves. That in the face of tragedy, we can be the people who help others to find hope. Because that is the example that Christ sets for us. Not just that he emptied himself to the point of death. But that even in the face of death, helping others was still at the forefront of his mind. He is still doing good, even when things are painful. He is still being an example of love so that others will know what love looks like.

Because that is the picture I have of Christ on the cross. He humbled himself on the cross so that we would know what love looks like. He humbled himself to the point of death so that we would understand humility and friendship. He faced difficulty so that we would know what strength truly is. That we would know that he is always with us. That we would know that the Holy Spirit is always there for us. That God's not turned his back on us, but is there to help

us even in the most difficult of times. God is our helper, even in times where we're not sure we have help. Because we can trust that in the face of tragedy, we are not alone. But it does not make suffering during tragedy easier to face. Because it will be difficult. When we face pain and hardship, we will struggle. What strengthens us is knowing that we do not struggle alone. That even when we feel abandoned, that we trust in hope. That even when the light is nearly extinguished, that we trust in hope. And that when we do so, it gives us the hope that we can trust that Christ is with us in life and in death. That it gives us the hope we need to carry on. And that even in difficulty, even facing death itself, together we may face what a new day may bring. 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 – Duality

This series is a special 2-part series and in it we will looking at the crucifixion and the resurrection of Christ. We will explore the duality of these Sundays. We will look at the celebration as Jesus entered Jerusalem that becomes the tragedy of his death on a cross on Palm Sunday. We then turn to the triumph of the resurrection on Easter Sunday. Through this duality, we explore the depth of love Christ has for us all.

4/13: Tragedy 4/20: Triumph

Neoga Grace UMC

752 Walnut
PO Box 610
Neoga, IL 62447
(217)895-2809
Worship 10:30am

Toledo UMC

Madison & Ohio St
PO Box 267
Toledo, IL 62468
Worship 8:15am

Etna UMC

2799 Etna Rd
Mattoon, IL 61938
Worship 9:30am

Rev Camron D St.Michael
<https://stmichael.pw>
cdstmichael@outlook.com
(316)530-3182 (call or text)
PO Box 54, Charleston IL, 61920

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