

“The Choice Jesus Gives Us”

**Isaiah 50:4-9
Luke 19:28-40**

**First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
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**April 1, 2007
Palm Sunday**

Many of you will be too young to remember when the space shuttle Challenger exploded, back in 1986. Those who do remember that ill-fated day will remember we learned a new phrase then - “O rings.” We all knew those by the end of that week, from the news reports. When the shuttle exploded and seven astronauts died, we looked for technical reasons - some external thing to blame these deaths on, and lo and behold the “O-rings” failed. For years I assumed that it was this technical design flaw - and flaw it was, I suppose - that was to blame for losing those astronauts. Sloppy engineering. Then learned something new about that incident, reading about the booster rockets manufactured by Morton Thiokol.

Turns out that two Morton Thiokol engineers, Roger Boisjoly and Arnold Thompson, told their management that the rubber O-rings sealing the rocket booster joints would lose resiliency at high temperatures, and might fail at providing an adequate seal against hot gases from the burning fuel. The engineers feared an accident and thought the launch should be scrubbed that day because the weather was too cold. Morton Thiokol’s management, the vice presidents for the shuttle booster project, for engineering, for operations, and the general manager of the space division, thought the engineers’ case on the safety margin and possible O-ring behavior was inconclusive, and under pressure from NASA gave the go-ahead. As the Spectrum magazine article put it, “Not one engineer or technician supported the decision to launch.” It wasn’t just a stiff O-ring that killed the astronauts. It was a management decision.

I got that same notion from the two different Gospel-writers we’ve read these last weeks, Luke and John. If you remember the John passages around the raising of Lazarus, the religious leadership determined to kill both Jesus and Lazarus, saying “If this Jesus business keeps up, the Romans are going to intervene, and destroy both the temple and the nation. We’ll lose all we’ve gained.” Luke records a similar reaction. During the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem (which we remember on this, Palm Sunday), the Pharisees said, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop shouting.” In other words - make them quiet, don’t draw the attention of the occupying authorities. And Jesus answers: “If these were silent, the stones would shout.” Later in that week Jesus would be arrested, sent to civil authorities (who didn’t care so much, but accommodated the local establishment) and would be killed. (We will remember that with a more contemplative worship service on Thursday night, Maundy Thursday. So be here then.) Why was Jesus killed? It was a management decision.

That may be the epitome of human sin - that we are really so divorced from God’s reality. There’s different ways to view the death of Jesus of Nazareth. Sometimes we speak this way about it: of God as an angry judge, ready to condemn us all and pronounce a death sentence, but Jesus took our place and suffered the death sentence instead. Can this be right? If so, isn’t it saying, “Well, God killed Jesus. Not really anything to do with us.” Or sometimes we talk as if Jesus chose the Cross

and went gladly to it. If that is so, isn't it saying "Jesus committed suicide. Not really anything to do with us." I can't buy either explanation. God didn't kill Jesus, but sin and fear and hate and anger did. And Jesus didn't commit suicide, but embraced life and love at every turn. So how are we to understand this sacrificial death?

Probably several things came together. From the Gospel accounts it looks like Jesus had a good idea that going up to Jerusalem would result in his death. Not that he sought it: he prayed in the garden, "if it is possible let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not my will, but thine, be done." Leslie Weatherhead likens Jesus' actions on Holy Week to the soldier who throws his body on the exploding grenade to save the lives of the friends in his patrol. Or picture Jesus in front of a speeding car. It would be insane to throw yourself in front of that bumper just to make a point. Rather, picture a speeding car in a school zone, and Jesus throwing himself in front of it to push a child out of the way. Instinctive love, and faithfulness to God no matter the cost. That is the impression I have of Jesus during Passion Week.

That's a good thing to try and understand, but what about the rest of the people in the story? I said a minute ago that I thought it was a management decision. That's strong language for me, since that is what I did for 18 years before coming here – as an denominational executive, trying to exercise faithful management of Christ's church. Maybe that is also why I can see how a few people with the opportunity, trying to manage the crisis they saw, decided Jesus was expendable. Decided that this outburst of enthusiasm, in language that welcomed the Messiah King on the pilgrim road, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!", that this outburst would invite Roman reprisal on the whole nation, that the Romans would think a revolt was in progress.

Jesus had allies in Jerusalem it is clear, from the "underground" who the disciples contacted with coded words to secure the donkey ("The master has need of it.") It is fairly easy to see a covert military action in progress, if that's how your mind works.

The motivations of others, the crowd who later this week will cry "Crucify him, crucify him", may range from apathy to a kind of sports-arena voyeurism. Certainly none of them, though, had believed his words or believed in him, believed that he was the Son of God. Either way, through willfulness or apathy, the human instinct then and now is to let go forward a management decision that will destroy love and grace. That will kill God among us.

John Fetterman writes that Jesus held up a kind of mirror to our own faces, and in it we see the mistrust, lack of justice, and woeful lack of love. The mirror shows a crucifier, if not the ones working for crucifixion, then the passive who allow it to happen. Most are in the passive group, he says. During the Holocaust of World War II, it took only a few people to kill the Jews of Europe. It took the indifference of nearly everyone to let it happen.

Jesus offers us this choice - the gods we make, or the God who made us. If we do not see in Jesus himself the God who made us, we will choose wrong. In ancient times, our gods entertained us and explained the universe. We had a goddess for the hunt, Diana. Or for crops, like Baal. We could blame our lust on Venus, or our anger and warfare on

Mars, or Odin. Today we are more sophisticated, and so we name them “Profit”, or “Security” or “Self-Actualization”. We’ve created them in our own image, as we needed them. The danger is, we tend to become like the God or gods we serve. Till somehow, sometime, some way, Jesus enters our city riding the donkey of the Messiah, in a parade both joyful and sorrowful, and offers us a choice - the gods we make or the One who made us.

The mirror Jesus holds up to us shows God as well, God in Christ, so we can see in human countenance God “face to face”, though in a mirror dimly, as the Apostle wrote. The church understands Jesus to be both human and divine, and in him we can see both what we are and what we might become. In worshipping Christ crucified and Risen we *must* be changed.

That is why it is important to do this same pageant every year, during this same week. So we get better at it, better at being changed by the risen Christ. Why it is important this week for you to be here this morning, to welcome Jesus into our city and our common life, why it is important to be around table on Maundy Thursday (Maundy = “mandatus”, “Commandment”) where Jesus gives us the sacrament and leaves the table to be arrested, why it is important to be here for the Good Friday service, to remember his sacrificial death, why it is important to be here on Easter Sunday, to look in the tomb to see what we will find there. We do it so we can act out here the choices for Christ we can make in the world. So we can bring the lived story of our lives into congruence with the story of the Christian faith. The choice Jesus gives us is to become what we were meant to be. We learn from His story on passion week that to be like him is to be servant to others, to sacrifice oneself for love and faithfulness.

Anything less is not worthy of our calling.