

Meditations on the Passion of Our Lord

Part 2: The Fourth Week of Lent until Holy Saturday

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Pastor Tim Pauls

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Pontius Pilate rules Judea in the stead and by the command of Caesar. He's charged with keeping peace, collecting taxes and pronouncing judgment. It all fits together: any government's greatest concerns are revenue and rebellion: if the money's coming in and the citizens are at peace, stability follows. That's why, while the Roman Empire will put up with quite a lot from its conquered peoples, it will not tolerate a hint of revolt. Anyone who says, "Follow me and I'll deliver you from Caesar" invites a quick and violent response.

Pilate is summoned to his judgment seat this early Friday morning at the behest of the chief priests. They've refined the charge against their prisoner from "evildoing" to treason. He's declared Himself to be a king, they say; and if He's set Himself up as a rival to Caesar, then He deserves to die.

From previous encounters, Pilate is already weary and wary of these leaders; but it is still given to him to conduct the interrogation. He asks the question: "Are You the King of the Jews?" This goes to the heart of it. If Jesus says, "Yes," then he's guilty. If He says "No"—and He certainly doesn't look like much of a threat to the Roman Empire, then Pilate can be done with this case by breakfast. "Yes" or "No." Easy.

Not so easy. Jesus responds that His kingdom is not of this world, then goes on: "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice" (John 18:37).

So that's it: Jesus is the King of Truth. He's come to tell people the truth. That's no threat to Caesar: many an emperor has proven that a sword is far more effective than the truth for governing. Furthermore, Pilate isn't ignorant; no doubt, he's been keeping tabs on Jesus. He knows at least the basics of what Jesus has been saying, perhaps that His truth includes paying taxes to Caesar.

Pilate shows cynicism next: "What is truth?" Indeed, it's a popular question. Politics sacrifices truth to power-hungry compromise and spin; in Pilate's world, truth is whatever serves Caesar. At the same time, the pious leaders of Judea—who declare truth a virtue—are lying through their teeth to have Jesus killed. What is truth? It's a victim to whatever the powerful want to accomplish. But Pilate knows this is true: Jesus isn't guilty, and he says so to His accusers.

The truth is this: all are sinful and all are liars (Psalm 116:11). All are willing to bend, shape, spin or deny the truth in order to gain desires or avoid punishment. Lies are easy to tell: and if you are relatively good at speaking the truth to others, it is still far too easy to lie to yourself as you seek to prove that your sinfulness is not that extensive. That's the truth, and that truth hurts. It identifies us for who we are: sinners who easily deny our condition.

Here's the truth that heals: Jesus speaks the truth before Pilate. He speaks it though it leads Him to the cross so that you might be forgiven for all sins, all lies, all deceptions. He tells you the truth about your sin so that He might also tell you the truth that He's died to save you from it. That's the truth. That's your life.

27. Silent to the Slaughter

Mark 15:3-5

Monday

The interrogation stalls. The chief priests hurl all sorts of accusations against Jesus. We don't know what they all are. From elsewhere in the Passion accounts, we can guess they include "traitor," "insurrectionist," "liar," "tax-cheat," "vandal" and more. But whatever they say, Jesus gives no response. No matter how ludicrous the charge, He stays silent.

Pilate knows Jesus is innocent—he's said as much. But the Accused shows no hint of righteous indignation. Those who are falsely accused are usually adamant about their innocence, especially when a guilty verdict leads to crucifixion. But the King of Truth has stopped speaking. He won't say a word to defend Himself. He just stands there and takes it.

This fulfills prophecy: "He was oppressed, and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so He opened not his mouth" (Isaiah 53:7). The Savior is still demonstrating that He is the promised Messiah.

But why the silence? Why doesn't He refute the charges? Would it be wrong for Him to defend Himself against the lies? Has He given up?

The silence is for you. It's for all sinners.

Jesus just stands there and takes it because He's standing in the place of sinners. He takes it because He's taking the sin upon Himself.

If they call Him a traitor, He is not; but He's taking the sin of betrayal to the cross so that traitors can be forgiven.

If they call Him a liar, He is not; but He's going to die for the sake of liars, that they might hear the truth of forgiveness in Him.

If they call Him a tax-cheat, He is not; but He's bearing the guilt of all who defraud, so that they might be forgiven.

If they call Him a vandal, He is not; but He's going to the cross for all those who have vandalized and destroyed the property of others.

If they call Him a murderer, adulterer, thief, pornographer, author of genocide, or any other sin (no matter how repulsive), He does not defend Himself. He's not guilty, but He's not there to defend Himself from these accusations. He's there to bear the sins to the cross and destroy them. He's there to suffer God's judgment for all of these sinners.

There may well be a sin or two that specifically gnaws at you—that you have trouble forgiving yourself for. Because of the guilt you feel, it will seem that God is silent to your pleas for forgiveness. But the Lord is not silent to your confession. His time for silence about sin was before Pilate, testimony that He was accepting the accusation, the sin and the guilt upon Himself. Whether your sin was specifically named, it has been borne by Jesus to the cross (Isaiah 53:4-5). Now, the Lord says to you, "For Jesus' sake, I do not condemn you for your sin—because I've already condemned *Him* for your sin. Because He's already suffered My wrath, I've only got grace left for you. You are forgiven. Go in peace."

28. Strange Bedfellows, and Other Lessons

Luke 23:7-12

Tuesday

Jesus undergoes His third trial. The first was before the chief priests, who want Him dead. The second was before Pilate, who wants Him to go away. Thus the third trial: hearing that Jesus is a Galilean, Pilate carts Him off to the ruler of Galilee.

And what does Herod want? A performance. He's heard much about Jesus and the miracles He's performed, and Herod's hoping for a little wonder-working. He's disappointed, though: Jesus declines to speak and refuses to perform any miracles or signs. It's not that He can't do it: sometimes people get the idea that Jesus can only perform miracles because those around Him have enough faith—as if their belief or desire somehow makes Him more powerful. But Jesus doesn't grow more or less mighty because of the level of faith around Him. He remains always the all-powerful Son of God; and He performs miracles according to His will, not the will of others.

Thus Herod is disappointed. He was hoping for a trained God on a leash, but instead gets a silent Savior. This is not a day for Jesus to fulfill prophecies of healings, but prophecies of suffering instead. Finally, Herod dresses Jesus in a splendid robe and sends him back to Pilate. Scripture records that, from that day forward, the two of them are friends.

We learn several lessons from Jesus' trial before Herod.

First off, it is easier to unite against something than it is to unite for something. Pilate and Herod have little in common and different agendas, but they are united against Jesus that day. So it remains: the Church can expect to be opposed by some strange coalitions that boast of their diversity to prove the righteousness of their cause. They may have nothing else in common than their opposition to the Gospel, and would otherwise work against one another.

It is polarizing to proclaim the Gospel, the means of grace included. Christians must acknowledge this, as did Jesus (Matthew 10:34-39). Where offense is caused while speaking the Gospel, you must be sure that it is not your sins (anger, impatience, cynicism, etc.) that offend, but the Gospel itself. Where it is the former, repent. Where it is the latter, do not.

Second, Herod is happy to have Jesus around as long as Jesus does what he wants. The same sinful nature is inside of you. There will be times when you'll be displeased or grieved that the Lord did not see fit to do things your way; and there will be times when you'll wish He'd go away so you could indulge in your favorite sin unseen. It's no better than Herod: there will be times when you want God on a leash, too.

Third, Herod dresses Him in a splendid robe before sending Him back to Pilate. Jesus is meant to resemble a king, perhaps a priest. Either way, Herod mocks Jesus, for he considers Him clearly to be no one of importance. You know better, because you live by faith—not sight. Jesus is the King of kings, the Priest and Sacrifice for the sins of the world. To defeat the evil that leads to such scorn, He remains silent before Herod and continues His way to the cross.

29. Sons of the Father

Matthew 27:15-26

Wednesday

His name is Barabbas, described in Matthew as a notorious prisoner. In Mark 15:7, he is known as an insurrectionist and a murderer. If he's your neighbor, you might as well be living next to a ticking time-bomb.

Pilate sees him as the solution. Per tradition, he's going to release a prisoner during the Passover festival. This time, he's going to let the people decide: do they want the man who kills or the Man who raises people from the dead?

It's a calculated risk. Barabbas may also be a hero to many in the crowd outside of Pilate's court that day. Once upon a time, Pilate raided the temple treasury to pay for a new aqueduct for Jerusalem. The people reacted violently, and it's thought by some that Barabbas was a leader in the uprising; thus, it makes sense that they would be happy to see him set free.

The chief priests urge the crowd to shout for Barabbas, an ironic testimony to their hypocrisy. They've justified the death of Jesus on the *possibility* that He *might* cause a rebellion against Rome, leading to violence (see devotion #19). Now, to make sure that Jesus is crucified, they urge the release of a man who *has* caused a rebellion against Rome, leading to violence.

The irony gets sharper. "Barabbas" is a title sometimes given to respected rabbis. "Bar" + "Abba" means "Son of the Father."

At the urging of the chief priests, the people call for the release of Barabbas. No wonder Pilate tries to wash his hands of the whole deal. The murderer is spared and the Life-giver is condemned. The insurrectionist is pardoned while the respected Rabbi is rejected.

The sinful son of the father is preferred over the only-begotten Son of the Father. It's the ultimate injustice.

It is also your justification.

Jesus is going to the cross for sinners. That includes Barabbas, who deserves death for sins and crimes. It includes you and me as well. Jesus goes willingly to the cross to be condemned for Barabbas' sins so that Barabbas can be pardoned—not by a mob or Pilate, but by God Himself. Whether or not Barabbas believes, we don't know. But you rejoice in this: Jesus has gone to the cross to be condemned for your sin, so that you stand pardoned and guiltless before God.

A few years ago, I served as pastor to an accused murderer during his retrial. I would tell him about the cross, of Christ's suffering and death for him. Each time, his reaction was the same: "I guess it could be worse." He missed the point. Jesus' suffering is not so hideous in order to make us feel better about ours. His death takes the place of the eternal death we deserve. He suffers the judgment for our sin, then shares it with us in Holy Baptism (Romans 6:4). The righteous One dies in the place of the unrighteous—in place of you and me. For the sake of His beloved Son, crucified and risen, the Father now says to you, "You are My beloved son. For Jesus' sake, in you I am well-pleased."

30. Satisfaction

Mark 15:12-15

Thursday

Pilate passes a verdict on Jesus. In fact, he does so three times during the Passion. Each time, he declares that Jesus is not guilty of wrongdoing. He's innocent. He should be set free.

Pilate is absolutely right. Jesus isn't guilty of heresy, because He *is* the Messiah, the King of truth and the Son of God. He isn't guilty of all the other charges, because the accusations were all false. After his gambit with Barabbas fails, Pilate demands from the crowd, "What evil has He done?"

The question goes unanswered. The time of reasoning is ended, and a mob mentality has taken over. "Crucify Him!" they shout. They want Jesus dead.

Pilate is about to oblige. After declaring Jesus innocent three times, he's going to sentence the innocent Man to death. He'll try one more thing: first, he'll have the innocent Man scourged to try to sway the crowd to pity. It's a terribly low point in Roman rule and justice: a ruler has an innocent man scourged and crucified. What's his reason? Our text says it is to satisfy the crowd. Given past events like the riots that ensued after he raided the temple treasury, Pilate is skating on thin ice with Rome. Another uprising could cost him his position, perhaps his life. "It's Him or me" seems a driving force in his decision-making, and the selfish sinner looks to save his own skin.

The chief priests are the ones who have whipped the crowd into a frenzy. Remember: they've charged Jesus with claiming to be the Messiah and the Son of God. Pilate sentences Jesus to death for being innocent, and the chief priests demand it because He's the Christ. They won't be satisfied with anything less.

Clearly, Jesus isn't crucified because of some colossal misunderstanding or because He's just in the wrong place at the wrong time. He's being put to death for being exactly who He is.

And the crowd? Who knows why the people do what they do? Motivated by the chief priests, perhaps they've bought the theory that Jesus could provoke a rebellion and a Roman crackdown. Maybe they've idolized Barabbas and are willing to trade Jesus for their "hero" because he's a man of action, no matter how foolhardy. Maybe they're just shouting "Crucify Him!" because everybody else is. It doesn't matter: sins of ignorance can be just as damning. Crowds are strange. They just want to exert power to be satisfied.

And you? The temptation to save your own skin is a powerful one. The urge to lie, deny and cover up a sin can be overwhelming when you're about to be found out. Pride entices you to consider yourself far better than you are, the first step to the chief priests in the text. Popular opinion—be it media broadcasts or delegates at convention—can make it hard to stand for what is right. Jesus has no defenders on His way to the cross. You and I would be foolish to think we'd be any better.

The malice and wickedness of this moment is appalling, and it's alarming but true that the same sinful nature clings to us. But faith sees what eyes don't: this Passion is not so sinners might be satisfied. It is so that God's wrath might be satisfied in the death of His Son, so that you might have life in His name.

31. The King

Mark 15:16-19

Friday

The entire guard gathers. They clothe the Man in a robe, place a crown upon His head and a scepter in His hand. They shout out “Hail, King!” (It’s that “Hail/rejoice” word again, like Judas used in devotion #16.) With that much information, it could sound like a coronation. It could sound like worship.

It is anything but. It’s a mockery. The soldiers aren’t there to testify that Jesus is King. They’re there to prove He is not. They’ve just scourged Him mercilessly, separating flesh and blood from bone. Now they wrap a purple robe across His flayed back. They put a stout reed in His hand as His scepter. They plait a crown out of sharp thorns and jam it on His brow. Then they mock Him. It’s their goal to reduce Him to nothing, a man beaten to a pulp in every way possible. It’s their purpose to demonstrate that He is no king. What sort of king would allow himself to be beaten with his own scepter? No, the soldiers are out to prove that this Jesus isn’t very much of a king at all.

Jesus could, of course, speak a Word and destroy them. Although they’ve done damage to His human body, His divinity is still completely intact. But the Lord continues to accept the blows and the abuse. The symbolism of this moment is startling.

When Adam fell into sin, God declared that the ground would be cursed with thorns and thistles (Genesis 3:18). From then on, Adam would labor and sweat and suffer pain as long as he worked the ground, until he returned to the dust in death. As Jesus draws closer to the cross, He bears the curse upon His brow; He is wearing thorns as He is about to suffer the death for sin, to reverse the curse brought about by the first Adam.

He wears a purple robe. Purple was a rare color, reserved for wealth and royalty because of its prohibitive cost; for purple dye was derived from the blood of certain worms, crushed to provide the color. This is the same worm of Psalm 22:6, a prophecy of the crucifixion: “But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people.” The Son of God is about to be crushed, His blood shed for the sins of the world.

He is beaten with the reed used as His scepter. He could give these soldiers a sound beating easily enough, but He hasn’t come to crack heads. No, in His work of salvation, “a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice” (Isaiah 42:2-3). He hasn’t come to snuff the soldiers. He’s come to die for them, too.

Behold your King. He will always be mocked by the unbelieving world. But He wears that crown for you—He goes to the cross to die for sin, to reverse the curse of sin. He shares that with you in Holy Baptism, drowning your Old Adam and raising you up enough. He permits His body to be beaten and blood shed for you; so that, risen again, He might give you His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. He is beaten with the reed because He does not add to His kingdom by force, but by His own sacrifice for you.

He is about to be led to His throne atop Calvary.

Hail, Jesus. Hail, our King.

32. King of Kings and Procurators

John 19:1-11

Saturday

Pilate is running out of options. John 19 begins with his sympathy gambit: in a twisted logic, Pilate has just had Jesus scourged because he finds no guilt in Him whatsoever. His “Behold the man!” appears an attempt to make the crowd decide that Jesus has suffered enough. It doesn’t work. The crowd still calls out “Crucify Him!” as Pilate declares Jesus innocent one last time. In Pilate’s mind, perhaps, the scourging will have a merciful effect, for the blood loss will shorten Jesus’ agony on the cross. But neither sympathy nor mercy is the purpose of the beating: it is, once again, to fulfill prophecy. Jesus is stricken, smitten and afflicted...by God...for us. By His stripes we are healed (Isaiah 53:4-5).

Pilate turns to the chief priests and attempts to pawn off the execution onto them. They refuse. They want Jesus dead, but they don’t want to get their hands dirty.

Who is left? With whom might Pilate bargain? There is only the condemned Man. Trying to provoke some response, some help, *something* from Jesus, Pilate demands, “Do You not know that I have authority to release You and authority to crucify You?” (John 19:10)

Jesus’ response is profoundly disturbing to the Roman: “You would have no authority over Me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered Me over to you has the greater sin” (John 19:11). The bloodied Man speaks His powerful Word. He tells Pilate that he’s not as “in charge” as he thinks. And if the accusations by the chief priests are true, then Pilate is about to execute the Ruler who has given him his authority.

One wonders if Pilate will reflect upon this later and find comfort. (Some church traditions teach that Pilate and his wife converted to Christianity later on.) Jesus has just told him that, while he plays an integral—and cowardly—part in this crucifixion, it does not take place without the Lord granting him the authority to sentence Him to death.

Here is comfort for you. As a Christian, you remain a citizen of a nation in this world. The Church has often co-existed uneasily with secular governments in history, and that unease grows today. It is easy for rulers to become idols. It can be easy to love and trust rulers more than God, because they can be seen and because they are instruments of God to provide for us. It can be easy to fear rulers more than God’s wrath; and the time may well come in our nation that Christians risk persecution if they are not willing to compromise the Lord’s Law and Gospel.

Either way, the Lord reminds us of our dual citizenship as He stands before Pilate. No matter our rulers’ religious views, we pray for them, honor them and obey them as long as we may do so without violating Scripture. We do so because they receive their authority from the Lord. We watch them, conscious that they are sinful like us and subject to incredible temptations of power: all the more reason to pray for those in authority.

Most of all, we rejoice in this: our help and salvation is in the name of Jesus: King of kings, Lord of lords, crucified, risen and coming again.

33. Carried Away

John 19:12-15

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

“We have no king but Caesar.” It’s a line you don’t expect to hear from the mouths of the chief priests. These are the same men who objected when Pilate’s guards marched with an image of Caesar on their standards because they considered such a graven image to be idolatry. If that’s how they felt about a picture, I daresay that they would be far more offended by Caesar’s claim to be a god.

But after all the seamy deception and dishonor of the past hours, they’ve come a long way. Their hatred for Christ the King is far greater than whatever shreds of consistency and integrity cling to their sinful natures. If it means getting Jesus crucified, they’re willing to say something that they probably never imagined they’d say: “We have no king but Caesar.”

They’ve gotten carried away. It’s more than that they’ve taken their idea way too far: this is the enslavement that sin brings. One transgression leads to another, which leads to another. Every temptation is meant to pull you further away from Christ until you don’t want to have anything to do with Him anymore—perhaps because of love for sin (“I’d rather have this sin than Christ’s forgiveness”), perhaps because of anger (“Who is God to punish me for this?”), perhaps because of despair (“I don’t think God could forgive me for what I’ve done”).

You see it in this world all the time. All sorts of addictions are a manifestation of the danger: one sample of methamphetamine or one click of a mouse button on a pornographic image leaves one looking for a little bit more, then a little bit more. The young are especially tempted to a little promiscuity in exchange for popularity, then a little bit more. A small offense on an irritating day paves the way to mean words that do damage and leave one asking, “Why did I say that? I didn’t mean that at all.” Missed communication opportunities pile up a wall that divides. Dulled consciences fail to react as sins mount. A little bit of false doctrine creates a toe-hold for more error, eventually leading the way to full heresy and away from faith.

None of this happens overnight. It’s gradual, frog-in-the-pot kind of stuff. That’s often how sin seeks to carry you away until you wonder if you could ever get back to God.

Here is hope: it is not a matter of you getting back to God, but the truth that Christ has come to you. He’s on His way to the cross because of sins like these, as well as all others. For you and your salvation, He’s borne your sin and gone farther with it than you’ve been carried up to now: He’s suffered the hell of being forsaken by His Father on the cross. All of your sins can’t take you farther than that.

But He wasn’t carried away. He went to the cross willingly; and having died for your sin, He is risen again. Romans 8:31-39 rightly proclaims that nothing can separate you from Him, because He’s defeated every enemy. Rejoice in God’s gift of repentance and confess your sins; for rather than let you be carried away by sin, Christ has taken your place on the cross to gather you in.

34. Blood

Matthew 27:24-31

Monday

The contrast in the two statements is startling.

First, there’s Pilate: “I am innocent of this man’s blood.” Pilate wants to be innocent. He wants nothing to do with Jesus’ death. His wife has warned him to have nothing to do with it, and he knows that this condemnation is being extorted from him. He’s no stranger to bloodshed, but he wants nothing to do with this one. He’s out of options, though: he’s made the political calculations and realizes that he can’t spare Jesus without losing himself. Jesus has to die.

If Pilate isn’t going to prevent that, he can try to salve his conscience by averting the blame. So he washes his hands with water and says, “I am innocent of this man’s blood.” Ah, the dream of the sinner: “I’m not guilty because I say so.” That’s called “self-justification.” Say it often enough, and you might even believe it. Any prison chaplain will tell you that “prisons are full of innocent people—just ask ‘em.” But your verdict doesn’t hold up before God: you can’t speak your sins away.

If Pilate’s statement is pitiful wishful thinking, the crowd’s is just appalling: “Let His blood be on us and our children.” So certain are they that they want Jesus dead that they’re more than willing to take responsibility. For the moment, anyway, they’re happy to boast that they’ve had a part in this crucifixion. In fact, they’re even willing for their children to share in the responsibility.

It’s another angle that the sinful flesh takes: if you can’t get rid of your sin, revel in it. Claim that you did it for noble reasons. Say that you did it for the children. Declare your “ownership” and talk about how it’s made you a better person. Persuade yourself that wasn’t such a bad thing to do; that it all worked out for the best, or that it will. But it won’t.

Your sinful flesh doesn’t care if you sound like Pilate or like the crowd. It doesn’t care if you’re denying your sin or boasting in it, because neither one is repentance. Both are ways of evading responsibility, of avoiding some of the words that Old Adam hates to hear, for you may speak them only by the work of the Holy Spirit: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (Luke 18:13)

Here’s what your sinful flesh hates to hear even more: you can’t speak away your sins, but Jesus can. The battered One who stands next to Pilate could speak a Word and send His enemies into oblivion; instead, He meekly endures the jeers, the treachery and the rejection. He is going from there to the cross to die in your place, for your sins. Now He says, “You’re not guilty anymore because *I* say so.” That’s the miracle of Holy Absolution.

You can’t wash your sins away with a little water, but Jesus can. By water and the Word, He joins you to His death and raises you up a new creation. That’s the miracle of Holy Baptism.

And while the crowd’s “Let His blood be on us and our children” was a statement of defiance against God, the Lord has better use of His blood for you: “the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7). Thus the miracle of His Supper, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.

35. Green Wood

Luke 23:26-31

Tuesday

Just after the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, Jesus mourns that the city will soon be destroyed: her enemies will surround her until she falls. Why is this to happen? Because “you did not know the time of your visitation” (Luke 19:44).

The same theme emerges as Jesus is led to Calvary. Women weep along the way for Jesus, but He tells them to weep for themselves. Things will only get worse. Green wood does not catch fire easily, but once the “life” has left the wood, it catches fire and destruction spreads rapidly. On this day in Jerusalem, the Life is still there: He’s being led to the cross and His death. He has been rejected, but the Son of God is still present in that place for their good. But what will happen in the future there because He is rejected? If Jerusalem’s inhabitants reject the Gospel, then all that is left for them is Law. Along with eternal consequences, zealots will see their works as the only way to salvation, and that salvation will include the work of rebellion against Rome. Roman armies, led by Titus, will surround the city. The siege will be so terrible that the “blessed” of women will be those who have no children, because they will not witness their starvation. Those daughters of Jerusalem who try to escape the city will have their hands amputated by Roman troops before they are returned to the city, only to increase the suffering there even more. The citizens will pray for the mountains to fall them, but there will be no relief.

That horror lies forty years in the distance; but apart from Christ, there is eventually only death.

We soberly recognize that, when a nation no longer tolerates the Gospel, it will soon reject the Law of God. Once the Law is rejected, evil abounds and such kingdoms have fallen throughout history. All of that is in the hands of the Lord who would spare Sodom for the sake of ten righteous (Genesis 18). We pray for our own nation, her leaders and citizens; and we give thanks that our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth (Psalm 124:8).

On an individual level, death comes to us all. It is the devil’s last chance and greatest weapon by which he can seduce us away from the Lord and His grace. It is at the end of life that we are far more dry wood than green, and the terrors of those days can be fearful. This is why you rejoice that you do not miss the day of the Lord’s visitation to you. The One who rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday is the same One who trudges to Calvary. He is the same One who, risen from the dead, visits you. He visits you in His Word and Supper, as really present as He was on the cross. He tells you that your sins are forgiven, that the grave’s bonds are broken and death has no hold on you. He tells you that the devil is defeated, that his whispers of doom are lies—and no match for the Lord’s true declaration that you are forgiven. He tells you that while your single-plagued flesh must fail unless He returns, that is not the end. Because He took His flesh and blood to the cross, He will raise you up for eternal life. Yours is not an end of weeping and lamentation. In Christ, it is the eternal day of resurrection, the marriage feast of the Lamb.

36. Left and Right of the King

Mark 15:21-27

Wednesday

In this reading, we witness once again how backwards sinners are when it comes to an understanding of glory. Back in the first devotion, we noted that Jesus predicted His death to the disciples at least three times; and each time, the disciples failed to comprehend what He was saying. We hear of the third time in Matthew 20, after which the mother of James and John came forward with a request: “Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom” (Matthew 20:21). In your typical court, these would be the positions of power, a king’s most valued advisors.

Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?” They said to him, “We are able.” He said to them, “You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father” (Matthew 20:22-23)

The rest of the disciples were indignant, prompting Jesus to tell them that greatness is found in service, and “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28).

Now on Calvary, the Son of Man is nailed to a cross. The world sees a criminal undergoing an execution, a pitiful end to one run afoul with the law. It sees a man to be avoided, one who is despised, rejected and scorned. He is not alone: with Him, they crucify two robbers...one on His right and one on His left.

Faith, behold your King. His crown is thorns, not gold or precious stones. His robe is stripped from Him and gambled away. His throne is a cross raised up on a hill, and those who call Him “king” there do so only to mock Him. But that is your King, doing exactly what He has come to do. He has come not to be served, but to serve; and He is on the cross according to His Father’s will, in service to mankind. He has come to give His life as a ransom for many: this King does not increase His citizenry by conquering nations and forcing allegiance at the point of a sword. He makes disciples of all nations by shedding His blood to redeem them from sin. The world sees a waste to be ignored; but on the cross, faith beholds the King in His glory.

The robbers who flank Him are fitting companions, for they are sinners whose guilt is evident. One will die repentant, the other unbelieving: Christ will die for them both, for He is on that cross for all.

As for you, do not be misled to think that the things of God will appear glorious by man’s terms in this world. There is great glory in a diminished, rural congregation gathered around His Word and Sacraments, because the King is present with them there. There is great glory in the pure proclamation of the Gospel: although it appears no more helpful to the world than a crucified man, it is God’s Word which gives life and salvation. There is even glory in repentance: for by God’s grace, the penitent turns away from sinners ideas of worldly glory; and only by faith he looks to the cross and says, “There is my King, my Savior.”

37. The First Word: Forgiveness

Luke 23:34

Thursday

When I read through Luther's commentary on Genesis 1 and 2, I'm left with a sad sense of "what might have been." He writes about the perfection of creation, and especially the perfection of sinless man before the fall. Created in the image of God, Adam and Eve naturally understood glory in God's terms. They naturally desired to serve one another—selfishness wasn't within their thoughts. Furthermore, they were perfect in body, free from sickness, pain, injury or death. They were also perfect in mind: not only were they subject to neither mental illness or forgetfulness, but they comprehended far more than we are able to. It's often said that we human beings use only 10% of our brain; in Eden, the other 90% was working perfectly and sinlessly. So when Luther writes about Adam's perfect thinking, he notes that our minds are damaged by sin so much that we cannot even comprehend how much we've lost. We don't know what holiness is like, and we can't comprehend our terrible is our sin.

On Calvary, the perfect Man is crucified. As the Son of God, He is certainly all-knowing; and as sinless man, His human mind is unencumbered by sin. As the Word made flesh, He has worked—body and mind—to seek, serve and save the lost.

Sinful man has immobilized the Savior on the cross. The hands that once touched to heal are now nailed to wood, as are the feet that once walked on water to terrified disciples. The world doesn't want the Savior doing good any more.

But His tongue is free, and the Lord saves by His Word. Even now, He speaks words of grace—and He speaks them for His enemies: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

It's true: they don't know what they are doing. Why else would so many delight in the brutal execution of a plainly innocent Man? Why else would they crucify the Son of God? Nowhere is the blindness of sin more evident than on Calvary. Nowhere else is the self-destructive nature of sin more on display. The Christ has come to save, and sinners make Him suffer for it cruelly as they put Him to death. Blind in sin, they have no conception of holiness—or of the depth of their own evil. They don't know what they're doing. They simply can't, and it leads them to the ultimate act of rebellion against God: killing Him.

But it is also true, these words which Jesus speaks: He speaks that they might be forgiven, declaring that He dies for their sins, too.

He dies for your sins, too. Conceived and born in sin, you are unable to comprehend God's holiness or sin's malice. If you did, your sinfulness would terrorize you far more than it does. You may also be at the point in life where you can sense the deepening frailty of your mind. But by the grace of God, you trust His Word that you're sinful and in need of forgiveness. You know that the One on the cross is afflicted for you, so that you might be forgiven—healed in body, mind and soul. Delivered from sin for eternity. For now, you see through a glass darkly, but then face to face. For where you do not know, the Lord still knows you—and He knows you to be fully righteous for Jesus' sake.

38. I. N. R. I.

John 19:19-22

Friday

I. N. R. I.

Jesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum.

In English, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." It's the sign that Pilate has placed above Jesus on the cross. For the Romans, it's a common practice at a crucifixion: a sign is placed above the head of the victim to tell passersby what crime he has committed, and to discourage them from doing the same.

The official charge against Jesus, then, is that He is the King of the Jews. That's why He is crucified. The chief priests argue with Pilate to change it, so that the charge is that Jesus said He was the King of the Jews, but really wasn't. Pilate doesn't budge, but instead declares, "What I have written, I have written."

We don't know Pilate's motivation. We don't know if it's bad humor or beginnings of repentance or just a desire to stick it to his tormenters. But whatever his reasons, the sign declares some profound truths.

For one, just like all his three verdicts of "not guilty" upon Christ, the sign makes it clear that there is no misunderstanding. Jesus is crucified for being exactly who He is: the long-awaited King. The chief priests want the sign modified because they don't believe He is the King—but their unbelief doesn't change who He truly is. The Lord remains the Lord, whether people believe in Him or not.

For another, the sign is intended to discourage others from committing the same crime. Heed this well: according to this sign, all those who claim to be the King will die. There is an eternal truth proclaimed here, because Jesus Christ is the only-begotten Son. He is the Savior—the Way, the Truth and the Life. Salvation is found in Him alone.

Therefore, anyone else who claims the same—to be the King who saves—will die, as will any who follows him.

This is certainly true of all false teachers and messiahs who have declared a different way of salvation: we do not say this with glee, but only to give Christ due glory and revert to the truth that salvation is found in Him alone.

But there is a threat closer to home. Remember the temptation that the serpent whispered to Adam and Eve in the Garden: "You will be like God." That's the desire of the sinful nature that still clings so closely to you and me. To defy God's law and willfully sin is to say, "I make my laws—I'm the king!" To believe that we save ourselves by our works, our intentions, our decisions or anything else is to say, "I make my own gospel, because I'm my king!" But the one who claims to be the King who saves can read the sentence on the cross: death. Not just physical, but also eternal.

That's why you rejoice in Jesus, the One on the cross for being the King. He dies that death in your place, so that He might put to death that sinful nature in you that desires to be your ruler. He suffers death and hell on that cross—your death and hell for your sin.

The King dies to give you life—life in His kingdom forever. So it is written. So it is true.

39. Ironies

Matthew 27:39-43

Saturday

The ironies are stunning and bitter.

The crowds shout, “You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross” (Matthew 27:40). It’s the voice of unbelief. They don’t believe that He’s the Son of God. They don’t believe He can save Himself. They don’t believe He can come down from the cross. If He truly were the Son of God, wouldn’t He do just that?

No, and this is where their unbelief especially manifests itself. *Because* He is the Son of God, He isn’t going to save Himself. Instead, He is going to die to save them. He *isn’t* going to come down from the cross precisely because He *is* the Son of God. His glory is in service and sacrifice. He works His power chiefly in mercy and pity.

But unbelief denies all that. It calls out to Jesus, “Save Yourself.”

And thus it is left to the unbeliever to save himself. But only death awaits.

The chief priests jeer, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in Him. He trusts in God; let God deliver Him now, if He desires Him. For He said, ‘I am the Son of God’” (Matthew 27:42-43). They don’t believe either, but they say what would make them believe: if Jesus would come down from the cross, they would believe in Him. *If the Savior abandoned the act of saving, then they would believe He was the Savior!* But this fits their theology: they believe they’re saved by works. They believe that the Savior should save Himself by works. Save yourself, and I’ll save me: that’s the idea behind works-righteousness. If Jesus comes down from the cross, He fits their ideas of what a Savior should be.

If He doesn’t, then they’ve got Him right where they want Him.

There’s another great irony in our text: they are fulfilling prophecy. They are acting out the part of the enemies of the Messiah in Psalm 22: “All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me; they wag their heads; ‘He trusts in the LORD; let Him deliver Him; let Him rescue Him, for He delights in Him!’” (Psalm 22:7-8). But the LORD doesn’t rescue Him: He is not on the cross to be rescued, but to rescue others by His sacrifice.

And once again, He is on that cross willingly. The crowds and priests might believe they’ve got Him right where they want Him, but it would not be so if it were not His own will.

This leads us to an irony of Gospel, your comfort at this ugly sight: no matter the jeers and the unbelief, the blood and the scorn, on the cross Jesus is right where you want Him. He is right where you need Him. By the Law of God, you are well aware that you cannot save yourself. Dead in sin, you need to be raised to life. The Lord is on that cross to die your death to sin, then to rise again—so that He might join you to His death and resurrection in Baptism. He did not save Himself so that He might save you. Now, in His means of grace, He remains with you so that you might have life in Him forever.

40. The Second Word: Paradise Restored

Luke 23:36-43

Sunday of the Passion

Paradise. It’s a long way from the hill called Golgotha, “the place of the skull.” I don’t think that anyone looks at the Lord on the cross and thinks anything close to “Paradise.” Anything is an improvement on this scene. Anything would be a relief from the spectacle of three tortured, dying men.

But Jesus speaks of Paradise to indicate far more than just relief. He’s referring to heaven, of course, but there’s a richness to this reference. “Paradise” is originally a Persian word that means “garden;” and by the time of Jesus’ birth, the Septuagint (the Old Testament translated into Greek) used “Paradise” to indicate specifically the Garden of Eden.

Theologically, Eden is unreachably far from Golgotha. In Eden, God could walk with man, present with unhidden glory. When Adam and Eve fall into sin, God seeks them out and speaks to promise the Savior. On Golgotha, fallen man puts God, the Savior, to death. Eden is a lush garden, and in the center of it stands the Tree of Life. Hearing the Gospel accounts, one only imagines Golgotha as a desolate hilltop, in the midst of which is the cross and the dying Son of God.

Eden is heaven on earth—God and righteous man together. Golgotha is nearly hell as man tries to kill God and banish Him from their presence.

But it’s not quite hell on that hilltop, because Jesus is still there speaking gracious words. His Word works faith; and despite all of the mockery and violence, a miracle occurs. One of the robbers repents of his sin and makes a faithful confession: “Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.”

One might sneer that the robber is simply caving to desperation and making his 11th hour confession, that he regards Jesus as his only hope left and thus casts wildly for help. Our response is simple. The robber is convicted by the Law: far better than most, he is aware that he’s sinful and deserves only wrath. He *does* regard Jesus as his only hope left, because that is true: not just for him, but for all. This is a miraculous confession: he looks at the Man hanging next to him, far more bloodied and weak, and declares Him to be the King who can save.

If there’s any further doubt as to the robber’s intentions, Jesus takes them away. He who knows the heart says, “Today you will be with Me in Paradise.”

While we do not see Jesus in a glorious kingdom on Golgotha, there He is still the King. And wherever the King is, there is also His kingdom of grace. He forgives the robber his sins, for Jesus bears them on His own shoulders; and He declares what this means: for the robber, the desolate world of sin is almost over, but hell is not for him. Instead, for Jesus’ sake—and by Jesus’ promise, the Garden of Eden is restored. The robber will be in God’s glorious presence, sinless, righteous and *alive* forever. All that was lost in Eden is his again, because the second Adam is dying to undo the sin of the first.

That Paradise is restored for you, too. You don’t see it yet, but this you know by the grace of God: that cross on Golgotha is the Tree of Life. On it, Jesus has regained Paradise for you.

41. The Third Word: Mother and Son

John 19:25-27

Monday

Mary stands beneath the cross. Simeon's prophecy (Luke 2:35) of her anguish is fulfilled, that a sword would pierce her heart also. The Scriptures do not say, but one wonders what runs through her mind: years before, she wrapped her Creator in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger—a paradox beyond comprehension, to be sure. This is another one: now, she sees the Author of Life breathing His last and about to die. No matter how He looks, He is still her Son. And God's Son. And the Savior.

We don't know what Mary thinks, but we do know what Jesus does. Seeing her standing below the cross with John, He says, "Woman, behold, your son!" And to John, "Behold, your mother!" Even crucified, the Lord still speaks to keep His holy Law. The Fourth Commandment orders, "Thou shalt honor thy father and thy mother." With some of His final words, Jesus honors His mother. He commends her to the care of a beloved disciple who will see to her temporal needs and tell her His life-giving Word. He is to care for her, and she is to be cared for by him.

The Son is dying. The mother comes. And it is the Son who acts in service to His mother. Even then, Jesus keeps His holy Law to credit you with His perfect righteousness.

Among others, Johann Gerhard has noted that Mary serves us as a portrayal of the Church. As Christ was born of her, so Christians are born in the Church by water and the Word. In fact, we confess in the Large Catechism (Creed, 3rd Article, ¶42) that the Church gives birth to every believer through God's Word.

Like Mary, the Church remains beneath the cross. We look at the One who hangs there and acknowledge that He is Jesus Christ, conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary, Son of Man and Son of God. The cross is the King's throne on earth—a position of shame to sinful man, but the glory of Christ in service to all as He sacrifices Himself for the sins of the world.

As Jesus commended Mary to John, so He commends His Church to the Ministry of the Word. We are not left to fend for ourselves, to scratch out a living until He returns. We are not abandoned or forsaken, because we still have the Lord's Word. By that holy Word, He continues to give us grace and salvation. By that Word, the Incarnate Word remains present with His people.

As we are given the Word for life, so it is entrusted to us that we might keep it, treasure it and proclaim it. A church that does not hold fast to the Word will turn to other words instead, following manmade doctrines and rationales that lead them away from the Gospel. Such a church no longer stands beneath the cross, but looks for another savior—one more glorious in man's terms, one less bloodied and unappealing. But that is a different savior, one that cannot save.

So Jesus entrusts His vulnerable mother to an apostle who will speak to her His Word; and He commends His vulnerable Bride to His Word so that she might remain. For there, in His Word, we hear of Christ, the Son of the Living God; crucified, risen and coming again. And defended by this Word, the gates of hell shall not prevail against the bride of Christ.

42. The Fourth Word: God, Forsaken

Matthew 27:46-47

Tuesday

Even so near His death, the Lord is praying the psalms: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" So begins Psalm 22, which so graphically prophesies the crucifixion. It continues: "Why are You so far from saving Me, from the words of My groaning? O My God, I cry by day, but You do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest."

There is night on Calvary in the midst of day: the sun has disappeared for the past three hours, for this is no place for light to shine. The Son of God is hanging on the cross, despised and rejected by men. But while that is fulfillment of prophecy, it is not man's rejection that saves you. That is not the Gospel.

Here is the Gospel at its most raw: after an eternity of the closest communion as two persons of the Holy Trinity, the Father does not answer the cries of His beloved Son. The Son is forsaken by the Father on the cross.

The Father damns the Son for the sins of the world. As St. Paul later writes, "We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake He made Him *to be sin* who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:20-21).

To phrase it one more way, the Son endures hell for those three hours of darkness. This is the outer darkness, the place of weeping and gnashing of teeth, because the Father is no longer present for the Son. On the cross, Jesus is God-forsaken. For you, He is God, forsaken.

So when you are tempted to consider sin trivial or comfortable, set your eyes upon the cross. The afflictions that are visible from the cruelty of man are horrific enough, but are only a hint of the suffering that comes with God's wrath for sin. Without the Lord's presence, there is no light or life or any good thing; and that is hell. The Savior does not hang there only for the whoppers, the big sins that even you consider to be bad; He suffers there even for the little ones that you're willing to indulge because they make your day a little easier and sweeter. When tempted to believe that sin is no big deal, mark the Sacrifice that is made to save you. It is not that sin carries no price tag, but that the terrible price has been paid by Christ Jesus for you.

And yet, Christ's suffering is not there to burden you with guilt; rather, He is on the cross to relieve you of the entire load. Yes, the price to be paid for sin is a terrible one, for the wages of sin is death—not just the physical end of a body, but the eternal separation from God and His grace. The price is a terrible one, but the point of the cross is that Christ pays it for you. Because God made Him to be sin who knew no sin for you, He now knows no sin in you: He sees you clothed in Christ's righteousness. Because God expended His wrath for sin on His Son at the cross, He has no wrath left for you—only grace, mercy and every blessing. Because Jesus was forsaken on the cross for your sin, you will never be forsaken by God.

Jesus' God-forsaken cry is not the final Word—for Him or for you. The final Word is mercy and grace, for the Savior conquers sin and death.

43. The Fifth Word: Thirst

John 19:28

Wednesday

“I thirst.”

It’s no surprise. Hard labor will do that. So will blood loss. The sufferings of Jesus over the past hours will certainly lead to dehydration. It is no surprise that He is thirsty.

He says this to fulfill the Scriptures, and perhaps this goes back to Psalm 22 once again: “I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; my strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death” (Psalm 22:14-15). This is no small reason to give thanks: God is thirsty, and He is thirsty because He has become flesh that can be thirsty, in order to bear your sins to the cross.

Perhaps we can push this a little bit more. Without water, life is impossible. Without water, there is only death. The Lord as Shepherd in Psalm 23 does *not* lead His people to dry, burning sands, but beside still waters. This last Word of Christ is found only in the Gospel of John; and so is another well-known account in John 4. Outside the Samaritan town of Sychar, Jesus meets a woman who comes to draw water from the well. She comes alone, making it a pretty good bet that she’s a social outcast. She’s been married five times and is currently living—unmarried—with a sixth. Whatever sins she has committed, and whatever has been done to her, she’s had a rough go.

She’d be forgotten in history, except that she meets Jesus; and the Savior says to her, “Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14). The living water of which Jesus speaks is forgiveness, and He speaks that forgiveness to the woman that day. Forgiveness is hers because He is going to bear her sin to the cross: on Calvary, the sinless Son of God is judged for fornication, adultery and all sorts of squalid sins—because He is condemned in her place.

In John 7, Jesus goes to Jerusalem for the Feast of Booths, as the Jews remember their wanderings in the wilderness. It was an arid desert, where the Lord provided water miraculously at times (Exodus 17:6; Numbers 20:8). On the great day of the feast, Jesus stands and declares, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water’” (John 7:37-38). There is no relief, no life to be found by following the rules of the Pharisees, by working one’s way for salvation. For Jesus’ sake, the Spirit delivers living water, grace and salvation—because of the Son’s work of redemption on the cross.

Thus when Jesus says, “I thirst,” we marvel that He endures that physical suffering for our benefit. But beyond that is this awesome truth to ponder: Jesus’ thirst goes far beyond His tongue stuck to His jaws. So that you might be alive in Him, He is dead before His Father in heaven. There is no life for Him as He endures the Father’s judgment for the Samaritan woman, the Pharisees and you. But because He has done so, you will never be thirsty again.

44. Sixth and Seventh: The Last Word

John 19:30 and Luke 23:46

Maundy Thursday

“It is finished.”

Bear with me for a moment of Greek grammar. In Greek, “it is finished” is all one word in the perfect tense. That matters: the Greek perfect tense indicates that an action has been completed, but the effects of that action go on. So, if “I have stopped the ball,” it’s not rolling anymore.

So when Jesus says, “It is finished,” then it’s finished; and this is cause to rejoice. It is not that Jesus is saying His life is over: if that’s finished, you have no hope. Likewise, if He’s announcing the end of God’s mercy, then you’re left only with despair.

You rejoice that His announcement is far different news, informed by His final words from the cross: “Father, into Your hands I commit my Spirit!” Yet again, Jesus prays the psalms from the cross, this time the first half of Psalm 31:5.

The second half of the verse proclaims, “You have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.”

What is finished? The time of God-forsakenness, the condemnation of Jesus for the sin of the world. That is what is done. Abandoned by God, Jesus has suffered hell on the cross during those hours of darkness. But now, before His last breath, that desolation is over. He commits His spirit to His Father—He announces that God, always faithful, has redeemed Him.

The price is paid. The sacrifice is finished. There is nothing else left to be done. When Jesus descends into hell, it will not be to suffer more, but to proclaim His victory to the spirits in prison (1 Peter 3:18-19). Risen again, He does not declare, “My part is over, and now your work of earning salvation has begun.” No, it is finished. And the effects continue.

The sacrifice made by Christ on the cross is once for all—once for all time, once for all sinners. There is nothing left to be done. There will not be a time when His forgiveness runs out. There will not be a time when He requires that you save yourself by your own doing. The price is paid. It is won and done.

Now, for the sake of Jesus, you pray, “Into Your hand I commit My spirit; you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.” What comfort, for death looks like the finish. It looks like the end, since you and I see the grave give none back. It appears to the eye as the ultimate enemy, because it always wins: humanity suffers a 100% morality rate (Elijah and Enoch excepted), and many of your daily, mundane decisions—like when to pull into traffic or whether to eat the cheese that’s been in the refrigerator for a long time—are made to postpone death as long as possible. You’re no match for death: it’ll beat you every time.

But death is no match for Christ; and His “It is finished” also announces the end of death’s reign. Now, it is an enemy under His feet—one which He uses for now to deliver you from a world of sin to life everlasting. In Christ, your spirit is committed to God, for you are redeemed. Death does not have the last word. Christ does; and with it He proclaims eternal life for you.

45. Positive Identification

Mark 15:37-39

Good Friday

The Gospel of Mark begins, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). It’s quite a start: from first sentence of the book, you know the identity of Jesus.

Those in the Gospel do not; and one thing to look for as you read through Mark is who Jesus is perceived to be. Some, like Herod, are just plain wrong (Mark 6:14). Some, like the brutal soldiers of the Praetorian guard, are right, but don’t know it (Mark 15:18). Evil spirits, on the other hand, are right and know it (Mark 1:24); but they don’t like it one bit. Some, like Pilate, are right and don’t care (Mark 15:26).

Then there’s Peter back in Mark 8:27-33, who manages to be blessedly right and diabolically wrong in a matter of six verses (cf. devotion #17).

Apart from Christ Himself, if you want the best confession of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, my money is on the centurion at the cross who says, “Truly this man was the Son of God.” Here’s why: there is nothing at all about Jesus’ appearance that makes Him appear to be divine. He hasn’t performed any miracles from the cross or worked any wonders. He hasn’t even done anything to ease His own suffering. There is nothing that the centurion has seen during trial or crucifixion to make him think Jesus is divine at all; and now, all he sees is a bloodied corpse on a cross. So what does the centurion have as the basis for his statement? The Word. We know that he’s heard Jesus speak from the cross, words of grace and deliverance. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ (Romans 10:17). That’s what he has to go on when he calls Jesus “the Son of God.” Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.

The centurion’s confession remains a scandal, a stumbling-block for many. Some “Christian” theologians have declared the cross to be far too barbaric a means for our redemption, saying that it’s incompatible with the Christian faith; out of Christian love and faithful to the Word, we must say that their argument places them outside of Christianity. Among many Christians, the crucifixion is a necessary doctrine, but one to be kept in a closet. The crucifixion is not an attractive selling point either to unbelievers or those who are looking for help with daily life. If you want to convince people that Jesus is the Son of God, it’s far better to go with His power and majesty, not His humiliation and death.

It’s the same error as Peter’s: people want Jesus who works wonders and performs miracles. They don’t so much want the Jesus who bows His head and meekly dies for the sins of the world.

That’s quite foreign to the truth of St. Paul, who purposed to preach “only Christ and Him crucified,” though he knew it was a stumbling-block to many (1 Corinthians 1:23). He knew that evangelism isn’t about Christians arguing people into faith, but speaking the Word through which the Holy Spirit calls.

As Christians, we learn from the centurion, who looks at the cross and says, “I believe.” In the darkness of Good Friday, when we see our Lord dead and all seems lost, we say, “Behold, our King—the Son of God, our life and our salvation.

46. From the Side

John 19:31-37

Saturday

“It is not good that the man should be alone,” declared the Lord at the Creation (Genesis 2:18). The Lord is not about loneliness and isolation. He is about communion, family, gathering. Flocks, not solo sheep. Royal priesthood, not individual priests. It was not good that man should be alone. “So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh.”

While Adam slept his deep sleep, the Lord created his bride out of his side. They were created to be husband and wife, to complement and serve one another. Together, they were to eat from the Tree of Life and avoid the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Together, they fell into sin and lost Paradise for all.

In a bit of schmaltz, some have offered that Eve was created from Adam’s side because she was always to be close to his heart. Throughout history, however, many have pointed from the creation of Eve to Christ on the cross.

He has breathed His last, and now He sleeps the deep sleep of death. When Pilate orders that the prisoners’ legs be broken, Jesus is spared because He is clearly dead. Instead, soldiers pierce His side with a spear. This fulfills prophecy (Psalm 34:20; Zechariah 12:10), as the Lord provides mercy and grace through the One who is pierced. It also provides a beautiful picture of the Second Adam’s work, and the creation of His bride, the Church.

When Jesus’ side is pierced, blood and water flow. St. John writes elsewhere, “This is He who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the One who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth” (1 John 5:6). As we spoke of earlier (devotion #12), water and blood are consistent signs of God’s grace in the Scriptures. We have salvation because we are washed in the blood of Christ. The Spirit works through the waters of Holy Baptism to cleanse us of sin and bring us into the Church. Or, as we hear in Ephesians, “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Ephesians 5:25-27).

Eve, the mother of all the living, was created out of the First Adam’s side as he slept. The Church, the mother of all those alive in Christ (see devotion #41), is created by blood and water as it flowed from the Second Adam’s side. He still washes clean with water. He still delivers His blood and body in the Supper to forgive sins and strengthen faith.

For His sake, you are forgiven. For His sake, no matter your sin, you are holy and blameless in the sight of God. And while you do not see Him any more than the disciples did on the day after His death, you hear His Word. You’re His beloved child, a member of the bride of Christ.

Tomorrow and forever, let alleluias ring.