

"Fearful Foreshadowing of Wholly Weak"
Deuteronomy 32:36-39

April 8, 2001

The Sunday of the Passion
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Boise, Idaho
Pastor Tim Pauls

I. Fearful Foreshadowing

Already it is clear: There will be trouble.

Moses is speaking to the Israelites one last time. They are about to enter the Promised Land, while it is time for him to climb Mount Nebo and die. These are his last words to the people that he has led as a called servant of the Lord; he preaches the Word of the Lord, sings his final song.

It has been a long haul, this journey: No sooner were the Israelites safe from Egypt that they built a golden calf and elected to call it their god. The Lord mercifully spared them that day, but other apostasy would follow. The disobedience of the people has made it a very long haul, for they were rewarded with forty extra years in the desert because of their doubt.

Now they are to enter, and Moses speaks one last time.

And in his final speech, he prophesies in part a terrible future: Eventually, the people of Israel will completely forsake the Lord and His Word. They will reject the Lord who has brought them out of Egypt, the God who promises a Savior; they will turn to idols instead. Their identities may not be known to them yet, but they will become household names. There will be Baal, the Canaanite god of nature, a pillar of stone set in the tops of hills. There will be his consort, Ashteroth, the mother goddess of nature—a tall wooden pole planted into the ground. There will be Molech, that abominable metal sculpture whose worship involves human sacrifice of the firstborn into fire. There will be Dagon, golden cows and many, many more.

The people will be faithless, turning to idols of stone, wood and metal, of death, doom and destruction.

What will the Lord do? Moses declares:

For the LORD will judge His people And have compassion on His servants, When He sees that their power is gone, And there is no one remaining, bond or free. He will say: 'Where are their gods, The rock in which they sought refuge? Who ate the fat of their sacrifices, And drank the wine of their drink offering? Let them rise and help you, And be your refuge.

If the people wish to call upon these other gods for their help and deliverance, the Lord will obligingly step aside. If they wish to offer their sacrifices to hunks of rock and curry the favor of chunks of wood, the Lord will allow them to go about their foolishness. If they declare that they

want salvation from a lump of metal, they Lord will step aside and let them pursue salvation from that god. The Lord is a loving Father: He offers all of His benefits to His people, but He does not force His salvation upon them.

So the Lord will step aside-but not forever, for He is faithful. If the people trust in chiseled rocks for protection, they will be victimized when the rocks do not protect them. If they rely on carved wood for help, they will be made helpless. If they seek life and salvation from molded metal, it is only a matter of time until they are face-to-face with death and destruction. Rocks, wood and metal can't save-they have no life, and therefore cannot give life.

So God will step aside-but only until the people see how worthless their false gods are. And when they see that they-both gods and the people-are powerless, the Lord will be there. When their power is gone, the Lord will declare:

'Now see that I, even I, am He, And there is no God besides Me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; Nor is there any who can deliver from My hand.

When the people are finally convinced that their false gods are dead and helpless, the Lord will be there. He will remind them that He is alive and powerful-that He is able to heal and give life. And He will declare that He is faithful: Although they have forsaken Him, He remains and promises salvation to all who repent and trust in Him.

Thus God declares, and the Word rings forth: I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; nor is there anyone who can deliver them from My hand. This is God's effective Word that carries across the centuries: There is an inescapable price to be paid for sin, and those wages are death. God utters the promise, and therefore the judgment will take place.

But who will He wound and who will He heal?

Who will He kill so that His people might be alive?

II. Wholly Weak

At the start of Holy Week, the perfect Sacrifice rides into Jerusalem on a colt, the foal of a donkey. He knows better than anyone the sins of the people and the deservedness of God's judgment; He knows better than anyone the reality of God's Word, the anger and grief of the Lord over sin. He knows because He has been there from the beginning to witness the sin and experience the grief. He knows because He is bearing the load of sin to the cross.

In truth, as the donkey plods forward, it is not just Israel in trouble: All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. For all sinners, it is true: They are helpless in their sin. Their power is gone, and there is none remaining. Therefore, Jesus arrives to be the perfect sacrifice for sin; He enters on the first day of Holy Week, to bear the burden of man's iniquity, and to die with it on the cross.

He rides into Jerusalem, and He rides on in majesty.

And He rides on in majesty to die.

You have heard this day of the Passion of our Lord from Luke 23: You have heard of the trials before Herod and Pilate, the conspiracy of the Pharisees and the shouts of the hateful crowd. You have heard of the crown of thorns jammed upon His head, the beatings by Herod's soldiers, the scourging of Pilate's. You have witnessed in words the staggering journey to Calvary as the cross is shouldered and borne. You have heard of the crucifixion and the ridicule by those who stand around.

Standing around are clergy, soldiers and citizens, Jews and Gentiles—a sampling of sinful mankind. And certainly—beyond the shadow of a doubt—sinful man shows how much he deserves God's judgment on Calvary; not only has he turned to false gods and doctrines, but he puts the true Son of God to death.

On Calvary that day, God's declaration still echoes from Deuteronomy: I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal. Nor is there any who can deliver out of My hand. God warns of the danger of rejecting Him, but His warning falls on deaf ears.

Except for the ears of One. The Son of God knows the score, and that is why He submits to this degrading treatment and death. The judgment of God is inescapable—it must fall on someone, and therefore the Son of God wills that it falls upon Him. The Lord's killing and making alive, His wounding and healing crisscross at Calvary. God's effective words of wounding and death strike His Son. Christ is wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities. The chastisement for our peace is upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed.

Behold the compassion of God at the cross: For us and for our salvation, He wounds and kills His own Son on the cross for our sin. He wounds and kills Him, so that He might heal us and make us alive.

It is why, even as the Son is wounded and dying, He speaks words of healing and life: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

The words are spoken, but fall on deaf ears.

Except for the ears of another. The centurion recognizes the Christ and declares, "Certainly this was a righteous Man!" It is not Jesus who should have died for sin; there are plenty of unrighteous people around that day who should have. But the all-powerful Son of God has made Himself wholly weak and dies for the sins of the world.

III. Wounding and Healing, Death and Life

God's effective, powerful Word resounds through the ages, and remains true and at work even now: I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal. Nor is there any who can deliver out of My hand. The Lord kills and makes alive. He wounds and He heals. For the sake of Christ, the perfect Sacrifice, God heals and makes alive. He has wounded and killed His Son for you; He does not desire your death, but gives to you life and healing for the sake of Jesus.

Of course, for those who reject His Law and the Gospel of Christ's sacrifice, death and judgment await. God does not desire the death of anyone—He has given His Son for everyone!, and their death is a waste of Jesus' death. If they refuse the gift of forgiveness, however, judgment and death await.

But as with the Israelites of old, the Lord is faithful and seeks to get their attention. His modus operandi is the same as with those Israelites in the Old Testament: He allows them to worship their false gods until those gods are exposed as false; and when they are wounded and powerless, He stands ready to deliver them from their sin.

A god is whatever we place our trust in-more than God Himself-for something in return. There are still idols of stone, wood and metal: Looking for contentment and satisfaction, people worship homes, cars and things. Searching for security, gods are made of careers, 401k plans and investments. People make people into idols, believing that the meaning of their life depends on another person; how unfair to take another mere mortal and expect them to be a god or goddess. The greatest-and original-false god is self. The big ego-the I, the ME-is what we look to most often to decide what is right and wrong. Our worship of self leads us back to the worship of other false gods-in our arrogance, we determine that we know what to worship better than God does. It is the philosophy of the day to live for self, make up one's own religion, pursue pleasure and avoid suffering.

These are popular idols, but they cannot save. No matter how nice the house, care or thing, it has no life and can't give life. No matter how great the job or the portfolio, it can't avert death or hear prayers. No matter how wonderful the person, they have sinful, mortal flesh. As for the self, you are already well-aware that you cannot save you. Otherwise, you would not be here this day.

Such false gods and idols persist and constantly tempt; and, afflicted by your sinful nature, you will be constantly, naturally tempted.

But such false gods have a way of falling apart, of self-destructing, of disappointing. Should you lean on such an idol, it is quite likely that you will be brought low.

If you are brought low, there is one thing to do: Repent and give thanks to God for His enduring mercy.

The Lord has compassion upon you, as He always has upon His people. To save you from eternal death, He trips up the false gods now before you die believing in them. He brings you low now so that He might show to you the folly of your sin. He allows some wounding now so that you might see the path to destruction, be turned from it; all so that He can heal you and make you alive for the sake of Christ.

God has wounded and killed His Son on the cross for you. Worship of false gods is to throw that Sacrifice in the Lord's face; it's to say, "Thanks, but no thanks for Jesus. I want to follow something else instead." The sin is grave, but God is faithful; therefore, in His mercy, He exposes the powerlessness of what is false so that He might save you with what is true-the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for your sins.

Therefore, when crashes occur, when you are brought low, it is a time for self-examination. It may well be that you have begun to lean on a false god, and the true God has pulled it out from under you to set your sight back on His Son.

This is true for you, and this is true for others.

You will, at times, encounter people who have placed their faith in what cannot save: It may be obvious to all, except them, that what they are doing is destructive to themselves and perhaps others. It is painful to witness, and that pain is a cross that you are left to bear. What shall you do? Pray for them, certainly; and trust that the Lord is faithfully at work, contending for their souls.

Such a one may need to be brought very low, to lose nearly everything before they turn around. Why? Because when their power is gone and their gods have disappointed them, they see their powerlessness and the treachery of their idols. It is then, when robbed of all false comfort, they may well be ready to be showered with the true comfort of the forgiveness of sins.

That comfort and that forgiveness is true: True for them and true for you. The Lord has compassion upon you, killing and wounding His Son in your place. He is now your refuge, and He is now your rock. By grace, He heals you and makes you alive; and there is no one who can snatch you out of His hand. Because of Christ's sacrifice, you are His, and you are delivered; for you are forgiven all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen