

Tonight we immerse ourselves in the passion and death of Jesus Christ, the savior of the world. And as we do that, as I have been urging us to do for all of Lent so I urge you now: pay attention. In a little while we will read through the passion according to Luke. Each of the Gospels has its own take on the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Each has its own emphasis and its own special contribution to the church's proclamation of the Good News. Tonight I want us to notice what Luke emphasizes and contributes. And to help us do that, I'm going to suggest that we focus our attention on two specific categories of action in Luke's account. First, pay attention to what we do, according to Luke, and second, pay attention to what God in Jesus Christ does. By "pay attention to what we do," I mean everybody in the story except Jesus. There is a long and unfortunate history in the Christian church of thinking of all those who contributed to Jesus' death as other groups of people that we can point our fingers at and distance ourselves from. That approach is not only unfaithful to the biblical witness, but it has led those who bear the name Christian to acts of great evil. What I'm suggesting is that we follow the thinking of the sermon hymn that we will sing in just a few minutes, specifically the second verse: "Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee? Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee. 'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee. I crucified thee."

So what is it that we do, we sinful human beings, in this whole affair of Jesus suffering and death? Remarkably, it takes a whole host of different characters effectively working together to bring about Jesus' crucifixion. First, there are the crowds. On Sunday, we saw how crowds of people welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem, waving their palm branches and acclaiming Jesus as their king. I said on Sunday that this same crowd, in a remarkable reversal, would very soon be calling for Jesus' death. One of you astute people, who was heeding my call to pay attention, challenged me on that assertion after the service on Sunday. He said that the text does not say that these were the same people. They could have been different people. I have to acknowledge that he is right. We don't really know that they were the same people. It is an assumption. It is certainly unlikely, given what we know about human behavior, that everybody welcomed Jesus' entry into the city, or that everybody called for his death. But I think it's also pretty likely, given what we know about human behavior, that some who at first welcomed him later switched their allegiances. From the text we know that to be true for at least one person: Judas. But I'll get to him in a minute. However we want to think about the composition of the various crowds in Luke's gospel, it is certain that by the time we get into tonight's part of the story public opinion has shifted. Jesus' arrest has shown that he is not the conquering hero the crowd expected and hoped for as he rode into town on a donkey. And the way Luke tells the story, it's pretty clear that he thinks that Jesus would not have been crucified if not for this shift in public opinion. But of course, public opinion doesn't kill Jesus. It merely enables and encourages those who do. It takes other to bring about Jesus' death. Some of those are the scribes and chief priest, the religious leaders, who so ironically don't recognize what God is doing in Jesus. They are looking for a way to kill Jesus, but are also afraid of the crowds. But those religious leaders don't have the authority to kill Jesus. They need the Romans for that, the political rulers of Judea.

But first they need Jesus. And to get Jesus, they need an inside connection. Judas provides that for them. Luke doesn't give us a real motive for Judas' betrayal. He only says that "Satan entered into him," and that he has paid for his efforts.

But even Judas does not actually kill Jesus. As I said, for that they need the Romans. Of all the Gospels, Luke's makes the Romans look the best. It may have been a strategy to help the Christian faith spread throughout the Roman empire. In his telling, Pilate doesn't want to kill Jesus. He considers him to be innocent, and he tries several different times not to kill him. But finally in the end, because the crowds and the scribes and chief priests insist, and I guess because it just seem easier that way, Pilate agrees to crucify him.

So what does it take to kill Jesus? It takes the powers that be working together to stamp out any threat to their grip on power. It takes conspiracy, betrayal, and corruption by some, collusion and complacency by others, and a public willing to be moved by resentment and contempt. How little has changed in two thousand years! It really doesn't take much imagination to see ourselves all over the place in Luke's passion account, does it?

So that's what we do. But what does Jesus do? First, Jesus does not fight back. It seems the disciples are ready to fight when Judas shows up with the soldiers sent to arrest Jesus. One of them strikes with the sword and cuts of a slaves ear. But Jesus says, "Don't!" and heals the slave. He does not resist arrest. Second, he forgives those who crucify him. This is found only in Luke. "Father, forgive them," he says from the cross, "for they do not know what they are doing." Jesus' conversation with the two who are crucified with him is also found only in Luke. To the one who recognizes his own guilt and appeals to Jesus for help he promises paradise. Finally, Jesus entrusts himself to God the Father. With his dying breath, he commends his spirit to the creator of heaven and earth.

There is yet one more thing that Jesus will do, even after he has been taken down from the cross and sealed in a newly cut tomb. There is one more thing that Jesus will do that will make all the difference not only to Jesus, but also to those whom he forgives, those who put him to death. There is one more thing... but for that we will have to wait. And so we wait now, knowing that this is not the end of the story, and confident that God will speak the light of his saving word into the depths of our darkness.