

“When Jesus Scares You”

March 31, 2019

Shadow Savior series – 4th Sunday in Lent

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the Word, Jesus, became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth, and we have beheld his glory, glory of the only son from the Father.

This is Jesus, the anointed son of God, described in his divinity by the Gospel of John in such powerful poetic phrases. The holiest of holy, one unlike any other.

And yet, here from our Gospel of Matthew today is Jesus, as well. The human Jesus. Born from the womb of his teenaged mother, Mary. Raised in a family of cousins and brothers and sisters. A boy who was trained and taught in the Jewish faith, with Joseph who was a carpenter; this Jesus who got dust on his sandals like everyone else, he who grew to become a teacher and rabbi as a man, who had good friends and companions and all of the human emotions and choices of life, that a man set apart by God could possibly face. Jesus. Fully divine. And also fully human. It is a tremendous mystery. Some of you will see Jesus as more divine than human. Set apart from the rest of us. And some of you will find comfort in seeing him as more human than divine. Theologians call this the study of Christology, and opinions about Jesus are vast and varied. But all Christians will allow that Jesus' divinity and humanity are both the truth, both expressed in his remarkable ministry.

Today in our scripture we come to our suffering Savior, Jesus, hanging on a cross in the hot sun, dying, his back striped bloody and raw by the cruel marks from the whips, spikes driven into his hands and his feet, his suffering beyond our comprehension, as people gather around and jeer and spit on him and challenge his God to reach down and save him now. In these excruciating last moments, Jesus knows an absolute, total abandonment. God is not going to save him. He is alone in the universe as he dies...and it is in this moment that Jesus says these words, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.” It is a moment of bleak surrender, as Jesus takes on the sins of the world, and breathes his last. He gives his life, that the whole world might be saved.

And when we wonder why God didn't rescue his son...why there was nothing but silence...let us also know this...that Jesus, at this moment, is quoting the Scriptures. He's hanging on to his faith, as he groans out his suffering with words from the 22nd Psalm. Jesus trusts in God, even when he feels totally abandoned.

This is the one we follow when we say we are Christians. The Savior with the ragged hole in his side from the spear. The Savior with the nail marks in his hands and feet. This is the Jesus who says to us, “Follow me.” Does it occur to us, now and then,

that maybe we should be a little afraid of being followers of Jesus? Because he really suffered.

Here's why he was being killed. Jesus had angered the followers of the religious law, the Sadducees and the Pharisees. They were good religious people. They knew the scriptures. But Jesus had broken those scriptural laws to heal lepers and to cure others on the Sabbath. Shame on him. That was against the scriptures! He even picked grain on the Sabbath to feed the hungry. Then Jesus ate with sinners and unclean people. When he saw that the Temple officials were cheating the poorest of the poor, he overturned the money-changers tables. There should be no cheating in the house of God. You see, Jesus cared about those on the outside, beyond the faith. He broke the rules, for heaven's sake. And so he had to die. It was the religious ones who killed Jesus. Is it possible that we should have a little fear about being followers of Jesus? What possibly might he ask from us? Could we get in some trouble, too?

Well, some memories come back to me. A number of years ago, 27 to be exact, I was at a 10 day Preaching Academy in Nashville Tennessee. I had been serving the church at Holland as an associate pastor and the senior pastor and I were dealing with a huge conflict that had erupted over...guess what? The issue of homosexuality that same issue that is causing schism in our denomination right now. It has been an issue that has taken so much heart and time and misery over the years, as we well know. Good Christian people were up in arms against one another. And the conflict was so difficult. Anyway, one day, during a break, I was tired and worn out and had an hour in Nashville to go visit the Cokesbury Bookstore. It was there that I saw something that I absolutely just had to purchase. So I bought it. This is it. A rhinestone Jesus pin. That's what I want, I thought, half-facetiously. I decided I wanted a beautiful Jesus to follow, meek, mild, shining, pretty, not dangerous and demanding and asking hard things of me. So I bought the rhinestone Jesus to remind me of all the things Jesus is NOT. Because the way of a Christian is not easy, if you are faithful. The truth is, so often those of us who follow Jesus want the Crown with out the Cross. We want the jewelry without the nails. We want the Palm Sunday Parade and the Easter Morning Resurrection without the Gethsemane Garden betrayals and the Good Friday sufferings. As Carlyle Fielding Stewart says, we want to be card-carrying members of the Christian faith, but we don't want to pay the dues.

To follow Jesus means to pay attention to his ministry, to stand for things that he cared about. And 'standing up for what's right often means pain, pain of rejection or persecution, and developing a willingness to suffer to bring about redemption.' (Carlyle Fielding Stewart) For instance, if you see someone treated unfairly, and you step in to help, there's going to be resistance. If you believe that a bill in Congress is against your

Christian principles, and you become active in opposing it, there surely will be others who will fight you. If you're in high school or junior high, and your friend is bullying someone and you report that to the teacher, you could lose that friend, or worse. Following Jesus, doing the right thing, asks something of us. Jesus was forever the champion of the outsider, those who suffered, those who were different, those who were poor. He opposed those who quoted scripture but hurt others while doing it. Jesus preached justice, and inclusion, and respect. This is the Jesus whom we as Christians rather easily say we follow. Can we step up and live as he expects us to live? Go ahead. Ask yourself. What would Jesus do?

To call ourselves Christian is to say that we walk in the footsteps of our suffering Savior. It's okay to be a little afraid to be faithful.

Finally, all of us who are Christians are aware that there is and will be suffering in our lives, right. We Christians will not be exempt from suffering. Some of the nicest, most faithful people have the worst things happen in their lives. (Jim Bethke) It's just the way it is. Sometimes when we pray, our prayers will not be answered the way we hoped they would be. Sometimes that scares us too. Try to remember that our Lord Jesus was not delivered from his suffering and death either, was he? But deep inside the universe of God's redemptive love, a glorious Easter morning Resurrection was awakening, like spring ready to burst forth through the cold snow of winter. God's redemption is on the way for us, coming, ahead, out of sight. Trust that. And trust that God is still with you, whether you can feel that or not. Just as God was with Jesus through it all. Because Easter, my friends, is coming. And God is going to have the last good word. Amen.

Invitation to prayer/journaling/reflection

Do you ever feel scared by what Jesus says or does or doesn't say or do?

Does Jesus' suffering or death scare you? What prayers are on your heart today as you offer God the struggles of faith?