

Good Friday
April 18, 2025
Stations of the Cross

In the name of Jesus, our Crucified King, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.
Amen.

In all of human experience, it is hard to imagine a bigger gap between expectation and reality than what the disciples experienced on Good Friday. The disciples, along with the rest of the Jews who were anxious for God's redemption, were expecting a revolution of synagogue and state. The truth is, the belief among the Jews of Jesus day was that the Messiah would bring about a spiritual renewal alongside the political restoration of Israel. The disciples had given up everything to follow Jesus and devoted themselves to His teaching, His Kingdom, and His cause. Many people today misunderstand the significance of the concept of political restoration. We are not talking about a change of parties in a peaceful transfer of democratic power. Roman oppression, just like the oppression of Egypt, warranted the common people of Israel to cry out for divine relief. It was actually the religious leaders among the Jews who were content with Roman rule and opposed any hint of revolutionary activity. The disciples' hope for a coincident political and religious redemption was far from shallow.

God had intervened in the political affairs of Israel on several occasions. Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia – God was clearly interested in the realm of politics, not for the sake of power, but for the sake of His people. And each time a political liberation came, there was a commensurate renewal of religious zeal among the people. The political and the religious life went hand in hand. By political, I do not mean it in the low sense of American electoral politics, but in the deeper sense as it was understood in the ancient world, that the political was about ruling and being ruled, about liberation or subjugation, about existence or annihilation. The disciples were looking for a new Passover, a new Exodus, and a new Kingdom. So, you can imagine the shattered expectations when they saw their greatest hope for the future arrested, trialed, and condemned to die. From the miracle of Lazarus, to the exultation of Palm Sunday, to the purification of the Temple, to the new Passover, there was much about the previous week or so to celebrate. Now, the distance between expectation and reality dealt a crushing blow to the hope for a new beginning. What were they supposed to do in the darkness of those hours? More importantly, what was the Son of Man, the expected Messiah, doing there? What was Jesus doing on the cross?

Tonight is the proper occasion for us to contemplate this reality. While the world is consumed by an intoxicating cacophony of desensitizing noise, let us sit in the quiet of the tomb and ponder the mystery of a reality that exceeds human expectation.

What was He doing there? Let's start in Jerusalem. What was Jesus doing there? On Palm Sunday, Jesus rode down from the Mount of Olives, across the Kidron Valley, and into the City of Jerusalem. To this day, the belief in Israel is that the Messiah will enter the ancient city through an Eastern gate. During the Ottoman Empire, the gate on the Eastern wall nearest the Temple Mount was blocked off to prevent any future Messiah fulfilling this expectation. They were too late. The

Messiah had already entered from the East and the Kingdom of God was coming to fruition as the Divine presence drew ever closer to that ancient dwelling place, the Temple Mount. The crowds greeted Him with cries of “Hosanna” because God was present to save them. The Messiah entered Jerusalem right where He was supposed to.

In the same week, Jesus caused quite a scene by clearing the Temple grounds of the money changers. What was Jesus doing there? During Passover, the Jews from the surrounding areas would make their way to Jerusalem. They would need to purchase a lamb for the feast, and they would also exchange funds for various other offerings they wished to present at the Temple. This was something endorsed in the Torah¹ and in the prophet, Isaiah². It was not the commerce that had Jesus upset, it was the corruption of the money changers and their exploitation of the visiting Jews that called for cleansing. Once again, this was something expected of the Messiah, and it signaled the spiritual renewal that would be ushered in under the messianic reign. To this point, reality was meeting the expectation, and it explains the growing fervor in the city.

Like the disciples, we too find it easy to follow God when He meets our expectations. This conditional fidelity to God is nothing more than self-worship, an idolizing of ourselves and our principles and our ideals. We are ready to embrace a god made in our image, a god that exists to serve us just as we are. Having crafted such an idol, we expect it to embrace us in return, but it isn't God we seek in this sycophantic praise of ourselves. It is our ego that reigns, and we are only moving away from the reality of God. The way to God is through repentance, but our repentance is often lackluster, partial, and temporary. I often hear Christians criticize the ancient Jews for wanting a political liberation, but we have used Christ to liberate our consciences from guilt, so that we may have a kingdom of our own, a kingdom of self-rule, of autonomy. We have found a way to forgive ourselves but have frequently failed to seek true forgiveness from Him. The reality is we are like dogs returning to our own vomit. We have given ourselves to the yoke of slavery to sin, and we call it freedom. We desperately need a new Passover.

Jesus was in Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, that ancient rite of sacrifice, liberation, redemption, and collection. Ancient rites carried a more impactful display of the price of sin than our current practices. At Passover, Jerusalem would have been crowded with the faithful who were there to observe the feast. This meant that many thousands of sheep would have been slaughtered then paraded through the streets. The sheep were carried through the streets with their front legs pinned outward, taking on a cruciform shape after being pierced by a pole. What was Jesus doing there? He was calling to Himself a new people. His body and blood would be the very substance of this unity in Him, just as that ancient Passover feast served to unify the Jews. Forgiveness was offered that night, and the yoke of slavery was removed from the participants of the feast. His sacrifice brings liberation through redemption in His blood, and He collects His people to Himself there.

¹ Deuteronomy 14:26

² Isaiah 55

Of course, the night then brought betrayal. Jesus was arrested, brought before the Sanhedrin, and condemned. He was brought before the Roman authorities in a shrewd move by the religious leaders. They would let Rome do their dirty work for them, and Rome was all too ready to take on the task. That Friday, reality ceased to meet expectations. Flogging, insults, mockery, abuse, all at the hands of brutal oppressors. Nothing would temper the reality of Jesus' torn flesh. Nothing would drown out the deafening strikes which drove nails into His hands and feet and pinned Him to the cross. In that moment, the expectations of many were shattered. Christ was on the cross. What was He doing there? He was doing the Father's will.

In contrast to the insincere repentance we put forward, Jesus set His face toward Jerusalem and all that would happen there. We fail to turn away from sin, He resolutely goes to His death for our sake. He carried out the Father's will in an unexpected place, but it was a reality that exceeded expectations. See, it exceeds expectations because we don't take sin seriously enough. We have no problem taking the sinful flesh seriously, but we rarely are so horrified by our sin that the cross makes sense to us as something expected or necessary. We rarely see our sin with enough clarity to understand the reality of the cross. If we did, we might change our behavior. Yet, there, the innocent Christ willingly became sin for us, fully identifying with us as a condemned sinner. The Son of Man became the Lamb of God in human flesh in order to stand condemned in our place. And He was there forgiving the very people who were putting Him to death. He was setting them free even as the hammer blows were ringing through the air.

What was Jesus doing there? He was becoming King over creation. Crowned with thorns, the cross became a royal throne for a King who conquers the reality of sin, conquers the reality of a penalty we deserve. The final victorious cry from the cross was, "Father, into your hands, I commend my spirit." This is not the statement of one who feels forsaken by God, but the confident statement of one who trusts that God will rescue Him from the sword and make Him King.³

They took the body of Jesus and buried Him in a tomb. What was He doing there? The reality of the crucified Lord, the Word made flesh, the incarnate God sacrificed Himself in a public display of solidarity with man, even becoming a man who died in our place. Having completed the work on the cross, He was placed in the tomb just before the sabbath settled on the land. He rested on the most holy of all sabbaths, the one consecrated by His blood, by His sacrifice. The tomb, however, could not hold Him in death. The Lord of Life would restore creation to a new beginning, starting with His own resurrected flesh. The resurrection is always in our view, giving light and hope in the darkness of this night. For we can see a reality that was unseen by the disciples.

As important as it is for us to ask what was Jesus doing there, we also need to know what Jesus is doing there, at the font? In our baptism, we are dunked into his death, and we gain a new life in His resurrection. There, we have been washed in His precious blood, purchased from

³ Psalm 22:20 & 30

slavery. The old yoke of sin is removed, and we find our repentant rest in Him. And what is He doing there, at our altar? There He is serving you as His treasured possession. He has promised to be with us, and He is with us there in a most real way. No mere matter of bread and wine, He dwells with us physically, and joins Himself to us as we eat His body and drink His blood. Every cell in our being is bought and brought into unity with Him by virtue of His work on the cross which He extends to us there.

So, let us not lose faith in the face of the unexpected. Let us fix our eyes on Christ, the founder and completer of our faith.⁴ In Him, our repentance is complete, our faith is complete, our hope is complete, and our salvation is complete. The reality before us tonight is better than expected. Christ reigns over His kingdom which is the earthly reality we experience today. Christ has brought a political restoration, just not in the expected form. The reality is what was long foretold in Isaiah, “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.”⁵ And He has restored the world spiritually, bringing the knowledge of the One True God to the nations. We see this truth in the reality of His crucified form, and as those who have been called into this reality, He is marvelous in our eyes.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁴ Hebrews 12:2

⁵ Isaiah 49:6