

***The Passion of Christ***  
***Mark 14:1-26***  
***March 28, 2021***

We enter an eerie garden at night. A few men lie asleep amid the grove of trees. A lone figure is pacing and talking out loud. We come closer and listen. He is praying. He had told his followers how deeply troubled he was feeling, to the point that sorrow gripped him like death. But they can't stay awake. Amid the quiet of the garden, after a meal, the scent of blossoms, and the silence, they are asleep in just moments. Jesus continues to pray. He asks God to remove this cup from him. In his anguish, we are told he prays even harder so that rivulets of sweat flowed off his head, like great drops of blood. This is our Lord at his lowest point. Here we meet him at the beginning of his passion in the garden.

Several years ago, twenty-eight of us from Erskine ventured out to the Westdale theatre on a snowy late winter night to see **The Passion of Christ**. This is not one of those movies that in years to come people will have to scratch their heads and try to remember if they saw it or not. Most of us will never forget the images of Jesus suffering at the cruel hands of the Roman soldiers. It's not a perfect film, let's be honest. There are lots of shortcomings. Yes, we might have wanted more of a context for this suffering. What did he do to warrant this death?

For most of the two hours we witnessed the unbelievable flogging, the excruciating walk to Golgotha, and the heartrending crucifixion scene. Apart from a few flashbacks to Jesus' teaching moments, his relationships with a few of the main characters, we don't have enough of his life and teaching to make sense of this madness and brutality.

In our discussion later most of us agreed that we can never again take communion lightly. The bread representing his broken body, the wine, his blood poured out, the words we say in the liturgy: all of this is given new meaning and visual reality after seeing Jesus' suffering for us. This suffering was for me, for you. Why was it necessary? I know we say in the Creed, "he suffered under Pontius Pilate." After seeing this film, I certainly have a much deeper appreciation of what this line in the creed means.

Martin Kahler, the 19th century German theologian, famously said that the Gospels are "passion narratives with extended introductions," a judgment

that rightly underscores the prominence of the events surrounding Jesus' death. Mark devotes two chapters (one hundred and nineteen verses) to the period from Jesus' anointing at Bethany to his burial in a rock hewn tomb, giving strikingly detailed coverage of this period of Jesus' life.

In his book, **Recovering the Scandal of the Cross**, Joel Green makes the case that the New Testament employs many metaphors to explain the meaning of Christ's death. A popular metaphor is the one where Christ offers his life as the blood offering to appease an angry God. In this imagery God is seen as the judge on his throne whose anger against our sins can only be satisfied by Christ's offering. Perhaps its popularity comes from the fact that we live in a society anxious to punish guilt and assign blame. Guilt must be uncovered, blame assigned, and sins punished. Perhaps this accounts for its popularity.

While this is one metaphor in the New Testament to explain the meaning of Christ's death, it is not the only one. There is in fact, what Joel Green identifies in his book, five constellations of metaphors in the New Testament drawn from spheres of life in the ancient world to explain the meaning of Christ's death. But on this Passion Sunday we are asking the fundamental question: Why did Jesus die? How does our gospel of Mark help answer this question?

Was it because of the failings of his closest followers? Judas betrayed him and his inner circle of disciples were too weak to keep awake and wait with him. In fact, they all ran away. Peter, despite his promises to stay loyal, denied him in his moment of trial. Mark even gives us the vivid image of an unknown young follower fleeing naked into the night from the scene of the arrest. It is true that Jesus died because he was betrayed, deserted, and denied by his followers. But is that the whole story?

Jesus died also because of the decisions of his enemies, both religious and secular. His ever-escalating conflict with the powerful reaches its endgame in these chapters. The religious leaders look for an opportunity to kill him, but in a way that doesn't antagonize the crowd. His arrest under cover of darkness leads to a sham trial in the high priest's courtyard. In the morning, an audience with Pilate proves that empire is more interested in keeping the *Pax Romana* than pursuing justice. His message threatened the authority of Rome by putting forward a new king, and it threatened Israel's assumptions about Messiah.

But that is not the whole story. Most importantly he died because of his own self-giving love. In the Gospels like Mark, he is depicted as a passive victim placed under arrest, mocked, beaten and impaled. Yet, in the final analysis, Mark is clear that Jesus' life was not taken from him, but given by him. This is shown by his silence before the high priest and Pilate. And in the last Supper his words and actions during the meal is symbolic of his offering of himself. He said to them: **he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body."** Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, **"This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.** What this tells us is that he chose to give his life for the world.

But even that is not the whole story. For it is the testimony of Mark that behind, and beneath, and through these many causes, there was also the inscrutable and deeply troubling will of God. We read it in the grammatically elusive ("must") of the first passion prediction: *Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man **must** undergo great suffering...and be killed...* (Mark 8:31). And most of all we overhear it in the tortured Gethsemane conversation between the reluctant but trusting Son, and the One he dared to call "Abba". In that grief-stricken garden scene, especially, we see his self-giving love aligning with God's sovereign will and purpose.

Jesus chose this path from the beginning. Mark tells us this clearly when we reach Caesarea Philippi. But from that point on Mark repeats Jesus' claim that he is going to be lifted up and that all will be drawn to him. This, he repeatedly tells us is why he came to earth. Our Philippians reading makes this bold claim: **though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.**

All of the events leading up to that dark day in Jerusalem, from the moment he left Bethany and his dinner with Simon the Leper, were carefully taken steps to fulfill his mission. It was a mission that Old Testament prophets had looked into and gasped in amazement. Think of that great prophet Isaiah and his insightful prophecy:

**But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities...and by his bruises we are healed. (Is. 53:5)**

In a nutshell this is the wide angle theological/biblical meaning of the crucifixion. It was planned, as Paul would write, before the foundation of the world so that the human story would end on a different note. Paul in Colossians: **For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.**

When we turn to the full range of the New Testament, we get a fuller picture of the meaning of the cross. It fleshes out the bold meaning of his death. It wasn't just a conflict over the meaning of Messiah. If so, he would have disappeared into the dust of history. Nicodemus had proposed to the Sanhedrin that they are judging him too quickly. He told the authorities: ***Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it? (John 7:50ff)*** They remind him that no prophet is said to come from Galilee; perhaps you are from there too, they say to deride his claim. In the final analysis, deaths by crucifixion were pretty common in Israel under Rome and were easily forgettable. But this one wasn't! This is what we celebrate on this Passion Sunday! He died for me and for you, to bring us back to God.

***Amen***