

Palm Sunday 2021

By Ben Cowgill

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my Heart, be acceptable to you O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

Jesus had to go.

Jesus knew it was time to go to Jerusalem; to give himself over to the powers and principalities of this world. The authorities were fearful and jealous; they thought Jesus had to go too. His own disciple, his friend, joined them in plotting against him to take his life.

The authorities wanted to silence Jesus; they wanted him to die, alone. They wanted to end his witness and those who would witness to his miraculous deeds and teachings. But God was not silenced; Christ was slain only to rise again. We know how the story ends; yet we tell it again, year after year; revisiting this most painful moment in our history and confronting the most frightening parts of our own sinful selves.

Johann Heermann puts it so well in the hymn *Ah Holy Jesus, how hast thou offended*:

*Ah, holy Jesus, how hast thou offended,
that mortal judgment hath on thee descended?
By foes derided, by thine own rejected,
O most afflicted.*

*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.*

Hymnal 1982, 158

Heermann raises the question that I ask myself every time I read the passion gospel; every time I shout the words "Crucify him!" as a member of the crowd. Was it I who crucified thee?

Entering into Holy Week means entering into the passion of Christ. It means journeying alongside him. We watch as first the public turn against him, then as Judas betrays him. Then sit vigil with the disciples who cannot keep awake. We hear Peter's promise to never betray him. Then his disciples scatter; Peter follows but sure enough denies Christ three times. The authorities condemn him, then the Roman authorities crucify him.

God himself seems to abandon him.

For a moment, for just one moment it seems that evil has won. The sky darkens, Jesus breaths his last.

Yet even in that dark moment, Mark flips the story. A centurion-- a figure of Roman imperial authority says clearly: Truly this man was the Son of God. Not the disciples, not a prophet, not an angel: the true revelation of Jesus's character comes from the mouth of another outsider, the very one who supervised his execution.

Whats more is this: the temple curtain is torn in two. Now what may seem like a strange detail to us is incredibly significant: The temple curtain was thought to separate the Holy One from all that is unholy - from humanity. From us. Yet in the very moment that Jesus dies, God rushes in. God removes the last vestiges of separation between the world and God! The story is not ended; no, God is still at work! And soon, so soon my friends, Christ will rise again. The tomb, so carefully prepared by the few women who were left, will be empty Easter Morning. Soon, we will see that all is not lost! Truly, this man, this crucified man is the Son of God, our savior, our Lord, our Jesus.

The original gospel of Mark ends with possibility: only eight more verses follow Mark's account of the passion. The men have fled to Galilee, and the women go to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body they are told by an angel that Jesus will meet them there. The story ends with the women fleeing in terror and amazement and they say nothing.

Yet they did say something; We know that the Good News got out. For how else would we be sitting here today? Why else would we be here, remembering and reenacting the beginning of the Good News? The Gospel of Mark ends not in the silencing of witness, but in new possibility. What will those do who have seen these things? And what will we do, now that we have heard them?

Amen.