

“Victorious Victim”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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John 18:1 – 19:42

We are living through terrible times. Thousands of victims of coronavirus have died, and the worst is yet to come. The death toll will mount swiftly in the weeks ahead. The millions of people already mourning will be joined by millions more. Billions are enduring isolation and loneliness, and the awful uncertainty about whether they or someone they love will be infected, and if so, whether they will live or die. Billions have suffered the loss of job or some income, or face the imminent prospect of that loss, and wonder how they’re going to make ends meet, and in some cases, how they’re going to eat. It is a time of high anxiety and frustration.

We feel helpless against the onslaught of this virus, our invisible enemy. There is much we can do to stay safe, but even the most responsible and vigilant know that risk remains. We hate feeling like this, the sense of being a victim or a potential victim, of being someone not in control of our future, of not being in charge. It’s offensive for a freedom-loving people. So the last thing we want to deal with right now is the death of Jesus.

If ever we wanted to skip Good Friday, and it’s never been a popular occasion, this would be the year. Of course, we know how the story ends, but that doesn’t take away the sting from what Jesus suffered for our sake, of how he was mocked, tortured, and crucified. Seeing him as a victim, even though we know what happens afterwards, just accentuates our own sense of vulnerability and helplessness. If Jesus, with all his power, wound up as a victim, what hope do we have? Perhaps we should just fast forward to Easter.

However, there’s something very different about Jesus’ experience of being a victim, and this crucial distinction gives us reason to hope and strengthens our faith. Jesus was a volunteer

victim who became the victorious victim. He went to the cross on purpose, so that we could live with meaning and purpose, even in our darkest hours. Jesus went to the cross motivated by a love we can scarcely imagine. And Jesus did everything in his power to get there, and at every moment he was, despite appearances to the contrary, in total control.

It started when he cleansed the Temple, turning over the tables of the moneychangers and rustling out the sellers of sacrificial animals. In other gospels, this event occurs near the end of Jesus' public ministry, and it's the last straw for the religious elite, but John sets this mess at the outset, very early on, in chapter 2. This action was very provocative, designed to gain attention and make those invested in the Temple angry, but what Jesus said about the Temple, that the dwelling place of God would be him, rather than some building, crossed the border into blasphemy.

Jesus already knew that one of his disciples would betray him as early as 6:64. "For Jesus knew from the first . . . who was the one that would betray him." Jesus could have sent Judas packing, but he didn't. By chapter 7, he was a marked man. "Now some of the people of Jerusalem were saying, 'Is not this the man whom they are trying to kill?'" [7:25] "The Pharisees heard the crowd muttering such things about him, and the chief priests and Pharisees sent temple police to arrest him." [7:31] In 10:31, "The Jews took up stones again to stone him," but as he did so many times, Jesus somehow got away, because the time was not yet ripe.

Do you sense a pattern here? It's not that Jesus is antagonizing his opponents just for the fun of it. It's simply that the truth he embodies and proclaims is revolutionary, a danger to those who valued the status quo, and he doesn't bother with soft-selling it. His provocative statements and actions could fill several sermons. Jesus made it quite clear who he was. There's no mystery, except for those who refuse to listen. Jesus makes claims about his identity as Messiah

and about his relationship with God that are clearly blasphemous based on the accepted standards of that time. In other words, he was not the victim of injustice, an innocent man falsely accused and convicted. Everything the religious elite said about him was true. He broke major rules with abandon.

The last straw in John's gospel is not the brouhaha in the Temple, but the resurrection of Lazarus, oddly enough. This demonstration of Jesus' power proved too much. By 11:19, the die was cast. "Caiaphas . . . said to them . . . that it is better to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed."

In the very next chapter, Mary anointed Jesus with costly perfume. It was an extravagant act and caused offense. Jesus defended her, explaining that she was anointing his body for burial in advance. Afterwards, in conversation with the disciples, Jesus asked, "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – 'Father, save me from this hour? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.'" [12:27-28]

Everything's proceeding as planned, leading up to the climax of the long gospel reading we just heard from chapters 18 & 19. Jesus knew that Judas was going to betray him, but appears to have taken no precautions to prevent him. When Judas arrives in the garden with an armed mob, Jesus asks who they're looking for. They answer, "Jesus of Nazareth." Twice, Jesus says, "I am he," or in some translations simply "I am," and the mob "stepped back and fell to the ground." What's that all about?

When God appeared to Moses in the form of a burning bush and sent him back to Egypt to set the Hebrews free, Moses wanted to know God's name. Whom shall I say sent me? God replied "I am who I am." It seems the guards with their weapons, when Jesus identified himself as "I am," had an instinctive reaction that validated the claims Jesus made about himself. Jesus

was that “I am,” and they bowed out of awe and respect for it. Of course, it didn’t keep them from completing their mission.

When questioned by the high priest, Jesus answered that everything he’d done or said had been out in the open. The priest could ask the people who had seen and heard him. Pilate didn’t fare much better. Jesus doesn’t give him straight answers either. Are you a king? “My kingdom is not from this world.” Eventually, Pilate got fed up and threatened Jesus, earning the rebuke, “You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above.” Who’s in charge? Jesus, not Pilate, who repeatedly tries to free him, but relents as the pressure for him to kill Jesus grows.

When we look at the whole story, or at least key parts of it, what we see is a deliberate, well-crafted attempt by Jesus to get himself crucified, to fulfill the prophecies, to fulfill his mission. He pushes every button he can . . . hard . . . and herds the people responsible for his death, almost manipulating them to the point that they really didn’t have much in the way of an alternative. This is the volunteer victim who in three days becomes the victorious victim. That’s a story for another time, but the idea of the volunteer victim gives us courage in this moment of grave uncertainty.

What Jesus shows us is that you can be a victim and still be in charge, or at least be confident that God is in charge. You can be a victim and still fulfill your purpose. And that’s good news for all of us, because in our isolation and anxiety and grief, we can still make meaningful choices that glorify God and help accomplish his purposes for our lives and our world.

Now you might say there’s a huge difference between Jesus, who chose to be a victim, and all of us, who have had this awful tragedy forced upon us, and that’s a valid distinction to

make. But we can, when the role of victim descends upon us, chose to embrace that reality with grace, transforming the sense of being out of control into one in which through the grace of God, we chose how to respond to this experience of victimhood, as Jesus did.

Unlike Jesus, we don't choose to be victims. None of us volunteered for this. However, like Jesus, we can make the most of what we suffer. We can turn that suffering into something redemptive by abiding in the peace of God. We can turn our suffering into something that reflects the glory of God, offering a witness of how faithful Christians handle even the most threatening situations.

It's not easy, and we can't do it without God's grace. It couldn't have been easy for Jesus to set himself up to be crucified, no matter how much he wanted that to happen. But when we live into our faith while we suffer as victims, we alter what it means to be a victim, from someone who is helpless to someone who is powerful, from someone out of control to someone who has enough control to choose how we respond, and through this comes the victory. Amen.