

## God Moves . . . to the Cross

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers  
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,  
on Sunday, April 10, 2022.

Luke 19:28-40; 23:1-49

Our worship theme for this Lenten season has been “God on the Move.” We’ve been exploring God’s work through the travels and teachings of Jesus. We’ve followed Jesus and his disciples on a journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. And today, Palm Sunday, we remember how Jesus rode into the city on a donkey surrounded by a multitude of his disciples shouting praises to God: “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”

This Sunday is also known as Passion Sunday, because today we also enter into Holy Week, the final week of Lent, when we remember that series of events which led Jesus not to a joyful coronation on a throne but to a brutal crucifixion on a cross.

Many years ago, Susan and I traveled to Mexico to visit good friends who were serving as Maryknoll Lay Missioners with the Roman Catholic Church. Paul was an engineer working with small farmers on solar energy projects. Mary Ellen was a nurse-midwife working with women to improve family health. Their young children, Hannah and Isaiah, attended school with other children in the village. They were growing up bi-lingual – learning English and Spanish at the same time.

One day, we all visited an old Catholic church in the area. Hannah, who was probably 6 or 7 years old at the time, sat with me in one of the wooden pews, and together we looked up at a life-size Jesus hanging on a cross. If you have ever seen a crucifix in a Catholic church in Latin America, you know that they can be especially gruesome. Jesus’ hands and feet were nailed to the wood of the cross with large spikes driven through his flesh. The wounds dripped with red blood. A deep gash in his side also

was red with blood. And his face grimaced with pain. The emphasis was clearly on Jesus' suffering -- his bearing the sins of the world.

After a few minutes contemplating this image, Hannah looked up at me and, on the edge of tears, asked me in a quiet, sad voice: "Why did people want to hurt Jesus?" My heart melted. What a beautiful, innocent question! How could I possibly answer her? Why, indeed! Why would anyone want to hurt someone so good, someone so innocent? Jesus healed the sick and cured the lame. He fed the hungry and brought good news to the poor. His message was one of love and peace. Why would anyone want to hurt Jesus, much less kill him, and in such a horrible way?

Well, the gospels give us some clues about why Jesus was killed. You may remember from Matthew's gospel, that when Herod learns from the wise men that a new king has been born in Bethlehem, he plots to kill the child. Herod doesn't want to allow a rival to the throne to grow up and challenge his rule. He tries to employ the wise men to bring him more information about this newborn king. But the Wise Men are warned in a dream not to return to Herod, and so they return to their own country by another road. His initial plan thwarted, Herod orders the killing of every child in and around Bethlehem who is two years old or younger. But Jesus, Mary, and Joseph flee to Egypt, thereby escaping the violence. So, you see, Jesus, born king of the Jews, posed a threat to the governing authorities from the very moment he was born.

Early on in his public ministry, when Jesus returned to Nazareth to preach in his hometown synagogue, his prophetic message made the congregation so angry that they actually drove him out of town, intending to throw him off a cliff! But Jesus "passed through the midst of them and went on his way." Jesus' words often had an edge to them. His message was not always welcomed and appreciated by his listeners.

Later in his public ministry, as he traveled from one village to another, teaching, healing, and casting out demons, Jesus received a death threat. Some Pharisees came to him and warned him to get out of town because Herod wanted to kill him. It was an ominous warning and deserved to be taken seriously. Herod had already had John the Baptist arrested and executed, because he feared that John's popularity with the crowds might lead to rebellion. And now, it appeared, Jesus might be next on Herod's list. But Jesus went on with his ministry, undeterred by Herod's threat.

When Jesus finally makes it to Jerusalem, he rides into the city on a donkey. Here, it appears that Jesus and his disciples are engaging in a bit of street theater. Jesus rides the donkey toward Jerusalem as his disciples and other supporters spread their cloaks on the road before him, the first-century equivalent of rolling out the red carpet. Some go before him and others follow, shouting, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" They were hailing Jesus as a new and different kind of king. They believed him to be the long-awaited Messiah, the Anointed One, who would drive out the Roman occupiers, restore the Davidic monarchy, and return Israel to its rightful place among nations.

Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem was something for his supporters to celebrate. But for the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, and the Temple authorities who collaborated with Rome, Jesus represented a threat to their power and position.

Moreover, it was the time of the Passover Festival and the Feast of the Unleavened Bread, when huge crowds poured into Jerusalem to commemorate God's deliverance of the Israelites out of the land of Egypt, out of the bonds of slavery. Given that the people of Israel were living under the boot of Roman occupation, it was a politically sensitive time of year, a potentially volatile time when the ruling authorities were especially concerned about keeping order and preventing unrest.

As soon as Jesus entered Jerusalem, he went to the Temple, where he drove out those who were selling things there. Clearly, Jesus was a troublemaker. In the eyes of both the Roman authorities and the Temple authorities, Jesus threatened the status quo.

Jesus taught in the Temple every day. And, Luke tells us, “the chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him; but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound by what they heard.”

“So they watched him and sent spies who pretended to be honest, in order to trap him by what he said, so as to hand him over to the jurisdiction and authority of the governor.” But Jesus was too clever for them. He would not be trapped.

Finally, Judas, one of Jesus’ twelve disciples, came to the chief priests and officers of the Temple police and volunteered to be an informant. Judas would let them know when and where they could arrest Jesus when he was away from the crowds, so they didn’t have to worry about an adverse reaction from the people. It was outside the city, on the Mount of Olives, under the darkness of night, that Judas would lead Jesus’ captors to him and betray him with a kiss. Jesus was arrested and brought to the high priest’s house.

The next morning, he was brought before the Sanhedrin, the supreme council of chief priests and elders in Jerusalem. They asked him if he was the Messiah, and Jesus did not give a direct answer. They asked him if he was the Son of God, and he said, “You say that I am.” They took his ambiguous reply as an affirmative answer and brought him before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. They accused Jesus of being a subversive (perverting their nation, fomenting revolt). They testified that Jesus told people not to pay taxes to the emperor, a seditious act. And they said he claimed to be the Messiah, a king, thereby posing a direct challenge to Roman rule.

In the end, Jesus was put to death, something only the state had the authority to do. He was hung on a cross to die an agonizing death. At a crucifixion, it was the Roman custom to display a sign stating the victim's crime. In Jesus' case, the sign read "The King of the Jews." Jesus was crucified for the political crime of high treason. He was considered a dangerous criminal, a traitor to the Roman empire. Accordingly, he died a criminal's death.

You'll notice that the gospels tend to soft pedal the state's role in executing Jesus, placing most of the blame on the Jewish authorities. But many biblical scholars view this as "spin" given to the story by the early church long after Jesus' death. The early church was a persecuted minority that did not want to anger the Roman authorities. So Pontius Pilate is portrayed as a reluctant participant, simply carrying out the will of the people. At the same time, there were tensions between Jesus' followers and the Jewish authorities. These tensions and resulting resentments led to the early church placing more of the blame for Jesus' death on the Jewish authorities than on the Romans.

So, if Jesus was executed as an enemy of the state, as a threat to the ruling interests of the Roman empire and its collaborators, you might wonder where the idea that Jesus died for us came from. Well, imagine how the striking garbage collectors in Memphis might have felt just after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. They might very well have said to themselves, "King died for us." Or when Archbishop Oscar Romero was shot and killed in El Salvador, it's easy to imagine poor Salvadoran peasants saying to themselves "Romero died for us." In the same way, Jesus' revolutionary new vision for the world and his bold challenge to the status quo in our behalf led him into conflict with the powerful authorities of his day. So, we who are followers of Jesus feel that Jesus died for us.

The idea that Jesus died for our sins, specifically, comes from his early followers who tried to make sense of what had happened to him. In the Jewish tradition, Temple priests would sacrifice animals to atone for people's sins. Jews would symbolically cast

their sins upon an animal. The animal thereby came to represent their sinful selves. In killing the animal, then, they were killing their sinful selves, thereby restoring themselves to righteousness.

Early Christians came to understand Jesus' death in a similar way. They saw Jesus' death on the cross as the final and ultimate sacrifice for the sins of the world. The cross thereby became transformed from a means of execution into the ultimate symbol of God's love and the ultimate symbol of Christ's obedience.

But as we'll see next week, the story does not end there. It does not end with Jesus' death. No, there is a surprise ending to this story – an unusual twist. It goes beyond your wildest imaginings. I hope you'll come back next week to hear it. It will blow your mind!