

Luke 22:14-23:56. Passion narrative

It's been my custom for the last couple of years to paraphrase the Gospel text for Palm Sunday, for a couple of different reasons. First, no matter whether we are hearing the words of Matthew, Mark, or Luke, they are long texts, and familiar enough to fool us into thinking we know all there is to know about the story. And while we favor the New Revised Standard Version of scripture on several grounds, its language is not easy to parse on a first reading or hearing.

This is a day of searing contrasts, isn't it? A moment ago, we were saying "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord," and hailing Jesus as a king. Hosanna, save us! And now we have forgotten all about that. Because the story of Jesus' Passion isn't ancient history; it is now. The ways in which we so easily capitulate to power, to peer pressure, to fear. But don't just take my word for it. Settle in and listen. I'll ask you to keep your hymnals open to the gospel refrain, #348, which is based on Jesus' request to his disciples in the garden of Gethsemane to keep watch with him, and we'll sing it several times throughout the reading.

This is the Holy Gospel according to Luke, beginning with the 22nd chapter. Glory to you, O Lord.

When it was time to eat, Jesus sat down with his friends and said, "I can't tell you how much I have looked forward to eating this Passover meal with you before I enter my time of suffering. I will not have another one until we eat together in the kingdom of God." And then he took the cup of wine from the table, gave thanks over it, and said, "drink this and pass it around, because I will not be drinking any more wine until the kingdom of God comes."

He picked up a loaf of bread and said a blessing over it, and then he broke it and gave a piece to each one there, saying, "This is my body, given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." After supper, he picked up the cup again, and said, "This cup poured out for you is the new covenant, made with my blood. See, the one who is going to betray me has his hand on the table right now. Now it's true that the Son of Humanity is following the path that's already been determined for him, but the one who turns him in to the authorities is wretched indeed."

And they immediately began squabbling about who among them would do such a thing. Hardly missing a beat, they started boasting too about who was the greatest. Jesus interrupted: “You know, kings like to brag themselves up like that, the ‘hugest,’ the ‘best,’ and people in authority want to hear how wonderful they are all the time. You don’t have to be like that.

“Most people think it’s better to sit at the table and be waited on hand and foot but, in fact, real leadership is to be the one who serves. Look at me; I have been living among you as a servant. I am modeling the way for you to be in the world. You have stuck with me loyally even when things were hard, and so through the authority of my Father, I am giving you a kingdom. You may eat and drink at my table anytime, and be strengthened to take up my work in the world.

“Simon, I’m talking to you now. Satan will try to separate all of you from me, but I have prayed for you in particular that your faith won’t fail you, and that when you come back from your time of testing, you will take what you’ve learned and help bolster everyone else’s faith.”

And Simon got a little hot under the collar then and said, “You know I would do anything for you. Go to prison for you, even die for you.”

But Jesus told him, “Look, Peter, before morning comes, you’ll have pretended you don’t even know me. Not just once, but three times.”

And then he turned to the others too, and reminded them about the time he sent them out with nothing—no money, not even any extra clothes or shoes. “You got along OK, didn’t you?”

“People were generous. It was a miracle. We didn’t lack for anything.”

“Well, a time is coming that isn’t like that. It will be harder to find a friend. If you have money or a little extra food, take it with you. You might even take some self-defense classes. Everything in scripture is happening the way it said, including the line ‘He will be counted as one of the criminals.’”

“We have a couple of swords here, Jesus.”

“Enough! Put the swords away. I didn’t mean that literally.”

Then he went to a place he liked to pray, the Mount of Olives, and the disciples came with him. He told them, "Pray that you won't be tested." And then he went apart a little ways and prayed. "Father, if you're willing, don't put me through this. But your will be done, not mine." He went back and found his friends asleep, passed out from grief. "What are you doing sleeping?" he asked them. "Pray that you won't be tested."

Right then a crowd came into this quiet place, led by Judas. Judas went up to Jesus to kiss him, but Jesus said, "Are you going to betray the Son of Humanity with a kiss?"

One of the disciples, still not getting it, yelled "Should we attack them with the swords?" And he cut off the right ear of the slave of the high priest.

"Good grief," said Jesus. "Put that sword away before you hurt someone else." And he touched the slave's ear and healed him. Then he said to the chief priests and the temple police and the mucky-mucks, "Are you coming after me at night with swords and clubs so you can write about it on social media? I have been in the Temple day after day, and you could have arrested me there. But, no, it makes a more dramatic scene if you do it under cover of darkness."

Then they seized him and led him away to the high priest's house. Peter was trying to follow at a discreet distance, and ducked into a courtyard. A servant saw him and said, "This guy was with them too." "Lady, I've never seen him before in my life."

A little later, someone else clocked him, saying, "You're one of those insurrectionists." Peter answered, "My dude, I am nothing of the kind." And then about an hour later, a third person raised his voice: "You are definitely with them. You're a Galilean; of course you would be." And Peter said, for the third time, "I have no idea what you're talking about." And just then, the work siren sounded for first shift. Jesus turned to look at Peter from across the courtyard. Peter remembered what he'd said, and broke down sobbing from shame and sorrow.

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The men who were holding Jesus began to beat him and make fun of him. They put a blindfold on him and said, "Prophecy! Who hit you that time? L-l-l-loser."

When it was finally light out, the officials convened a council and brought Jesus out in front of everyone. "If you're the Messiah, just tell us." Jesus said, "If I told you, you wouldn't believe me. And if I asked what you meant by your question, you wouldn't answer me. So this is all I have to say on the subject: from this point on, the Son of Humanity takes his place on the right hand of God's power."

They said, "OK, does that mean you're the Son of God?" He said, "You're the ones who keep saying that." And they said, "We have all the evidence we need. We heard him say it himself!"

Then the whole crew brought Jesus in front of Pilate and made outrageous claims. "This man is a socialist and a traitor. He is trying to persuade us not to make appropriate financial contributions to the Emperor and telling us that he's the Messiah and the proper king of this realm."

"Are you the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked.

"You say so," said Jesus.

Then Pilate said to the chief priests, "I don't see that this man has done anything wrong." But the priests were insistent. "He keeps stirring up trouble all over Judea, and in Galilee where he came from." Pilate was surprised to learn that Jesus was a Galilean but also happy to kick the can down the road to Herod, who had jurisdiction over Galilee.

Now Herod had been waiting a looonng time to meet Jesus, whom he'd been hearing about for years, and was hoping he would perform some magic trick or sign for his amusement. Herod questioned him at length, but Jesus would say nothing. Herod and his soldiers mocked Jesus and put an elegant robe on him for sport, sending him back to Pilate. Herod and Pilate had been suspicious of each other, but on that day, they became good friends.

Pilate brought together all the chief priests and functionaries and the mob that followed them and said, "You told me this man was a traitor, but I

don't see it, and neither does Herod. He has not committed anything like a capital crime, so I'll give him a warning and have him released."

But the crowds were stirred up and said, "Kill him! We want Barabbas instead!" (Barabbas really had been stirring up insurrection and had been imprisoned for murder.) Pilate didn't want to execute an innocent man, so he tried again, but the crowd shouted him down: "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

A third time he tried again. "What crime has he committed? I will give him a warning and have him released." But the crowd was starting to get violent now, and Pilate saw that he needed to throw them a bone. "All right, fine. I order Barabbas to be released, and Jesus of Nazareth to be crucified."

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As they led him away, they came across a man from Cyrene whose name was Simon. He was coming to Jerusalem from the countryside, and they made him carry the heavy cross that was intended for Jesus. Plenty of people who counted themselves followers of Jesus, or were at least curious about him, were following in the throng, including many women who were weeping and crying out.

He said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, don't cry for me. Cry for yourselves and your children. Because the days are coming when they will say, "Lucky are the ones who are barren, and the wombs that have never borne children. Lucky are the breasts that never nursed a child." And then they will say to the mountains, "Fall down and bury us," and to the hills, "Pull us underground." For if they do this sort of injustice when the wood is green, imagine what will happen when the wood is dry as kindling.

There were two other men, convicted criminals, were taken along with him to be executed. When they got to the killing grounds, the place called The Skull, they crucified Jesus, with one of the criminals on his left and one on his right. And Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them. They have no idea what they're doing."

And they gambled for who would get his clothes. And the people stood by watching, but the leaders said, "He supposedly saved others. Let him save

himself if he is the Messiah.” The soldiers also made fun of him, offering him wine turned to vinegar and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself.” And there was a sign over him that said, “This is the King of the Jews.”

One of the crucified men heckled him, saying, “Aren’t you supposed to be the Messiah? Get to work! Save us and yourself.”

But the other one spat back, “Don’t you fear God at all? We are under the same sentence, except that we deserve it, but this man hasn’t done anything wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

And Jesus replied, “I absolutely will. Today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Now it was about noon, and darkness spread everywhere until about three in the afternoon. The very curtain of the Temple was torn in two, and Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “Father, I am handing my spirit back to you.” And he breathed his last.

The leader of the troops, who was watching this, said, “That was an innocent and righteous man.” And the crowds who had come to watch the show hung their heads in shame and sorrow and made their way home. Jesus’ followers, including the women who had come all the way from Galilee, stood at a distance keeping vigil.

A man named Joseph was a member of the High Council but had not gone along with their plans. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was always on the lookout for the kingdom of God. He went to Pilate and asked for Jesus’ body so that he could be buried. He took Jesus’ body off the cross and wrapped it in linen cloths, and then laid it in a tomb carved out of rock, where no one had ever been buried before.

It was the day before the Sabbath and getting close to sunset. The women who had been standing by noted where Jesus body had been laid, and went back to prepare spices and perfumes for burial. When the Sabbath came, they rested.

This is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ.

