

## The Crucified, Among Us

Isaiah 50:4-8

Luke 23:26-49

April 10, 2022

Rev. Robert R. Howard

Community Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Tempe, AZ

His week started so well. Welcomed by crowds shouting praises, full of hope, furiously waving palm branches. But it all went downhill from there, right? And now here He is, arrested, the midnight inquisition, condemned by a jury of sneers, and dragged before the Roman authorities. And we call this “*Holy Week.*”

Well, today we will focus on Luke’s tale of the Crucifixion. And guess what? His version resembles that gory movie *not at all*. What? What? But look, totally absent from Luke’s telling are the other Gospel’s story of the abuse of Jesus: the stripping, whipping, mocking, spitting, robe, crown of thorns, beating up. No crowds deriding him over and over. No despairing cry torn from His lips. Luke shows *none* of that. Just not there. When you look to Luke, you see a completely different take on the crucifixion of Jesus. You see people all around Him all the time. Saints, sinners, and everything in between. Luke’s tale of the crucifixion of the Son of God soft-pedals the physical violence. He is more interested in the conversations. For Luke, Jesus is the middle-man offering the gifts of God to a hungry world. And He does exactly that up to his final breath. Surrounded by people. Speaking not in despair to a God Who has abandoned Him, but to those who turn to Him. And giving them the gifts of God. In Luke’s telling, Jesus is with people, giving, giving, giving, all the way to the end.

So look around in Luke, what do you see? Who are the folks surrounding Jesus? Well, first off, those who seek to crush Him. Eliminate His little movement. The religious leaders arrest this troublemaker, subject Him to a secret midnight kangaroo-court trial, and present Him to Rome’s governor Pilate. “Stirring up trouble,” they accuse, knowing which buttons to push. So Pilate interrogates Him, even sends Him to Herod, Rome’s Jewish puppet. Both rulers find Jesus innocent. *Three times* Pilate declares Jesus guilt-free. But the crowds are whipped up to a frenzy, and thunder for a convicted murderer to be set free in His place. Pilate responds, “I’ll whip this Jesus, and let him go. He’s broken no laws.” To which the seething crowd roars, “Crucify, crucify, crucify him!” Things are getting out of hand. So, with a nervous glance over his shoulder toward Rome’s all-seeing eye, Pilate gives in to their will. How can one politician withstand this hurricane? And, Luke says, “they” take over from there. “They” drag Jesus to the hill. “They” hoist Him onto the cross. Soldiers mock Him: “if you’re so almighty mighty, save yourself. Give us a show.” One criminal seizes the opportunity: “Yes, save yourself – and me!” “They” executed their will, perverting justice, murdering an innocent man. And to the opposition He says not a word.

But there are other people in that swirling crowd that day. Who choose *not* to participate in this crime. See poor Simon, an immigrant farm-worker fresh in from the fields, just ready to call it a day, when rough hands grab him, shove him into that ragged parade, and plunk the stranger’s cross onto him, to stagger up the hill. Walking behind Jesus. Following Him. Carrying His Cross. *That’s* discipleship, whispers Luke. And then you see a cluster of women, tears streaming down as He

passes them. Who knows if they weep for every crucifixion parade? But there they are. To them, He speaks: “Oh, don’t weep for me; weep for yourselves, for life will take turns for the worse.” Responding to their grief, in the midst of His own crisis, building a relationship. Now see Criminal #2, slumped on his own cross, who “rebukes” Criminal #1’s opportunism: “Oh, shut up! We got what we deserved, but not this guy. He’s innocent.” And then turns to Jesus, and begs, “remember me when you get wherever you’re going.” To which Jesus offers God’s gift, “I’ll see you later this same day, in Paradise.” A promise, made as death approaches, that there is more than death ahead. And then see that Roman tough-as-nails sergeant presiding at yet another crucifixion, who gazes up at the body after it is all over, and dares to praise the God of the Jews, declaring his own “not guilty” final verdict. And others, again women, watching from afar. What else can they do, but keep silent vigil? Yes, look at the other people in Luke’s telling. Outsiders, every one of them. Following, weeping, pleading, declaring, silently watching. Forming a makeshift community surrounding Him. Receiving from Him.

What does Luke want us to see? For him, the crucifixion of Jesus centers not on the gory violence done to the abandoned Jesus. No, Luke tells a story of *relationships in the midst of a crisis*. Of who was there, and what they did. Of the forces that moved them. Forces? The very same forces that forced Pilate’s hand. But, you see, force is not just loud volume, really. True force comes from inside. From someone who has faith in you. Who will stand *with* you. Stand up *for* you. All the way. Force like that can change you, because it sees not only the person you’ve *been*, but who you can be. Who you really are. There was that kind of force in Jesus. Even, even as his life force was draining away on that cross, He said, “Father, forgive them, they don’t know what they’re doing.” Calling upon his dearest relationship, He called down the force of God’s love, to set us free from all those misguided, hateful forces that try to split us apart, judge who is worthy, and kill those who are not. And from that Cross, His force of love touched all those around him. Filled them. Some shouldered His cross when it was forced on them, just like it was their own. Some could do nothing but stand nearby, watching in silent vigil. Standing with him, sharing their own force of silent support. And some recognized his innocence. Changed by his force. Spoke truth aloud. With *quiet* force. Luke’s version is about the forces that move us. And the force of God’s will that can *undo* the deadly forces that kill. The force of love, creating a new community, in the very *midst* of crisis.

So here we are, “Palm Sunday,” 2022. In the midst of our own crises, that just keep piling up: the pandemic that has snatched away nearly a million lives in this country, manufactured political crises that snip, snip, snip away voting rights, laws that throttle transgender persons from just living their lives, rents skyrocketing, casting people out of their homes and onto the streets, the war in Ukraine, ice-sheets melting as the temperatures rise, and on and on and on. We’re just trying to keep our heads above water, in the midst of all these crises. But, says Luke, looking straight at us, you are *not alone*. To the helpless, feeling trapped by shouting voices, to those conscripted into the unholy service of carrying His cross, to those who felt all they could do was watch and weep, Jesus gave gifts. You will follow in the force-field of My love. You will be with me after what you think is the end. You will be able to do what you can, no matter how your limitations squeeze you. Just like they did, *you* can. You can. Part of following Jesus is figuring out what you *can* do, against a roiling sea of yelling opposition, knowing that it will cost you — and doing it anyway. I remember the minister who sat all night with a newborn, nameless baby who had been dropped off outside the Emergency Room. The baby did not live the night, but there she sat until daybreak, in silent vigil.

The nurses tiptoed by the room. Past that holy space. She did what she could, in the midst of crisis. And the nurses never forgot it. And mark my words, come November, there *will* be people in Georgia, *knowing full well* that they are breaking the law by giving water and snacks to voters standing in line for hours. But they will do it anyway. Doing what they can, in the midst of crisis. Picking up His cross, and carrying it. With their own kind of force.

Friends, we can wipe a tear away whenever we remember “the old rugged cross,” and what Jesus did for me. We can argue about atonement theories. But Luke is not having any of that. Look at what they did, he urges, all those around the cross. Like them, let His force sweep you into its embrace. In the midst of *any* crisis. His force, supplying all you need. To do what you can. When the odds are overwhelming, hear the voice of Sen. Cory Booker to now *Justice* Ketanji Brown Jackson at her recent Senate hearing: “I’m not letting anybody in the Senate steal my joy. . . . Don’t worry, my sister. Don’t worry. God has got you. How do I know that? Because you’re here and I know what it’s taken for you to sit in that seat.”(1) Trust. When times get rough, when crucifixions loom large, do what you can. Keep on keeping on. Trust that God will use our small efforts to bring about God’s will anyhow. Against the odds. Amen.

#### **Note**

(1) “Senator Booker Moves Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson to Tears with Tribute,” CSPAN, 3/23/22; accessed online on 4/9/22 at <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c5007679/senator-booker-moves-judge-ketanji-brown-jackson-tears-tribute>