

What Will You Do With Jesus?

Luke 23:1-25

Jim Zazzera, Faith Presbyterian Church, 20 March 2016

Do you ever have someone in your life about whom you say, “I just have to do something about him! I just have to do something about her?” Jesus is like that. You just can’t ignore him. Like your nosy neighbor or the roommate who blasts his music all night. Like the political candidate who will not stop with his or her campaign ads, or the friend who corners you at the grocery store, you just have to respond to Jesus. You have to say something, you have to make a decision.

In his oh-so-gentle but ever-so-firm way, Jesus forces our hand. He evokes a response. It is hard to have have no opinion about him. As we just saw, Pilate discovered that. He wanted to wash his hands of everything related to Jesus, but that really didn’t work out so well. We just can’t shake Jesus off that easily.

One of the things we often try to do as Christians is to relate to Jesus without all the messy stuff. Think of it, we come to worship on Palm Sunday, to hear about children waving branches and people crying “Hosanna to the King.” We get to witness a beautiful and inviting picture. The very next week we show up on Easter Sunday and hear the words “Jesus is risen!” He is alive! How easy it is to think all is well in our world! How easy it is to believe that following Jesus is not half bad after all.

The Christian life is easy if we can skip all the difficult parts. If we can miss all the evil, the suffering, the betrayal, the fear, the death in our own life as well as Jesus’ life. But you see, if we ignore this stuff, we have missed the real power of Jesus’ story. Because the story of Jesus is not a Disney fairy tale. The story of Jesus is the truth of how God comes into the real, painful, messy life of humanity.

You might know that the New Testament include four gospels, four accounts and interpretations of Jesus’ life. Every one of these four gospels includes a section at the end that we sometimes call a “Passion Narrative.” These narratives are the telling of Jesus’ pain and suffering through the last week of his life.

The gospels walk us through that week of Jesus’ life—Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, his Last Supper, and his betrayal by Judas. We hear Jesus’ anguished prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, and see his brutal arrest. We witness Jesus’ religious and political trial, observe denial and desertion by his closest friends, and find him being sentenced to death. We see Jesus mocked and tortured and witness him being executed.

Wouldn’t it be nice if we could just ignore all this stuff—not because most of us recoil at gruesome or difficult scenes, but because as we listen to and imagine this story, it is too easy to see ourselves in it. We really don’t want to imagine ourselves as part of this drama. Yet we all have a response to Jesus. He is just too hard to ignore. And each of our responses is unique.

As I worked through today’s scripture reading, I was struck that these 25 verses are all about how people responded to Jesus. If you read the passage carefully you will be struck by all the different things that Jesus’ presence calls out of people.

Think about it. Some accused Jesus of fomenting revolution. Some said that he was stirring things up. Some sent Jesus away for someone else to deal with. Some treated him with contempt. Some examined and interrogated Jesus. Some flogged him and then released him. Some called for Jesus crucifixion, his execution. Some followed Jesus. Some cried on his behalf. Some gambled for Jesus’ few remaining

possessions. Some carried out his crucifixion. Some mocked and made fun of him. Some lovingly prepared Jesus body for burial.

We would like to distance ourselves from all this— pointing out that it was Pilate who was Jesus interrogator, not us. That it was the political and religious leaders ordered his execution, not us. That Judas was the one who betrayed him, not us. That disciples from over 2000 years ago were the ones to desert him. not us. *We had nothing to do with it.*

Safe and comfortable in my pew, I really would prefer not to take a stand on Jesus. When I look as his life, I see that he causes too much trouble, asks too much of people, and changes the world around him too profoundly.

But isn't that why we read the story? Don't we want to do more than learn about people in Jerusalem 2000 years ago. Are we really that interested in ancient history? We want to experience Jesus' presence now, in 2016 in Sacramento, California. We want to know him in our lives today.

We listen to this story because his interactions with people in the first century show us how we might interact with him in the 21st century. For you see, even today Jesus calls for me to follow. Even now, Jesus enter the pain of my own life.

Today, I would like to read for you the continuation of the passage from Chapter 23 of the Gospel of Luke. As I do so, I invite you to pay attention to those who encountered Jesus on the way to his death and how they responded to him. As you do so, see if you can see glimpses of how you respond to him in your own life.

Listen now with your mind and your heart:

26 As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. 27 A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. 28 But Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. 29 For the days are surely coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.' 30 Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us'; and to the hills, 'Cover us.' 31 For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

32 Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. 33 When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. 34 Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. 35 And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" 36 The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, 37 and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" 38 There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

39 One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" 40 But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41 And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." 42 Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when

you come into your kingdom.” 43 He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

44 It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, 45 while the sun’s light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. 46 Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Having said this, he breathed his last. 47 When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, “Certainly this man was innocent.” 48 And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. 49 But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.¹

Where are you in this picture? Are you Simon of Cyrene, helping Jesus to carry his cross? Are you in the crowd that followed Jesus to his execution—mourning and wailing? Are you one of the criminals, crucified beside Jesus—demanding that he show his power? Are you the other criminal, accepting your own fate, and simply asking to be remembered? Are you one of the executioners—gambling for Jesus’ remaining possessions? Are you a community leader who made fun of Jesus’ apparent lack of power? Are you a soldier who mocked Jesus and taunted him with a bit of sour wine? Are you the centurion who saw everything, praised God, and proclaimed Jesus an innocent man? Are you part of the crowd that in the end could only run away in grief? Are you one of Jesus’ friends and family, one of the women, who simply stood at a distance and watched and wondered?

Don’t we all still watch and wonder? Who is this man Jesus? Who is this man to us? What does he have to do with our lives? What will we do with Jesus?

As you leave the service today, you will receive a special gift from our children and youth. You will receive a portion of a palm leaf. The leaf itself, of course, reminds us of Jesus entry into Jerusalem—when crowds waved palm branches, shouted “Hosanna” and proclaimed Jesus as King. But you will find that the leaf will be woven into the shape of a cross. This reminds us that the man Jesus who a few days earlier was acclaimed as King, was ultimately beaten, and mocked and executed, suffering the fate of a common criminal.

This week, let this Palm Cross remind you of the many dimensions of Jesus’ life, both 2000 years ago and in our lives today. That Jesus is both King and Suffering Servant. Perhaps you will allow this cross to be a companion to you as you pray. I invite you to ask yourself, “What will I do with Jesus?” I invite you to ask Jesus, “Who are you in my life?”

May Jesus teach us, love us, and lead us through this Holy Week.
Amen.

¹ Luke 23:26-50, *NRSV*.

Next Step Questions

1. Is there someone in your life or our world (no need to name names) that it is hard staying neutral about? What about that person calls out a response in you?
2. Read Luke 23:1-25. What stands out to you most vividly? What questions do you find yourself asking?
3. Much of this story focuses on Pilate. Many of us think of Pilate as a villain, yet in some ways he embodies our own personalities and experiences. In what way might you be like Pilate?
4. The coming week is “Passion Week” or “Holy Week,” the days when we think most carefully about Jesus’ suffering and death. As you ponder Jesus’ last week, is there something you have always found difficult about this story? Is there something you find helpful?
5. What compels you most about Jesus? What challenges you most about him?
6. Of all the people in Jesus’ last days, who are you most like? Who are you least like? (Pilate, the crowds, the religious leaders, Herod, Peter who denied Jesus, Judas who betrayed Jesus, the soldiers who carried out his execution, the women who followed and prepared his body, Joseph of Arimathea, the disciples who deserted Jesus, others?)
7. Have you ever experienced Jesus entering a “messy place” in your own life? What was that like?

Table to Table Question:

Why do some people like Jesus? Why do some people not like him?