

April 3rd-Good Friday Message

Those of you who are members of Bethany know I usually don't have titles to my messages. Sometimes I could, but most of the time I really can't come up with one. Tonight, though, the title "Following the Crowd" seemed perfect.

First though, let's have a look at our Psalm reading that was our call to worship. The first verse is well known because of what Jesus said on the cross in Matthew 27:46. Most Biblical scholars conclude David is the author of this Psalm. The beginning tells must have been experiencing great suffering. The Psalm continues and in verse 18 he laments, "They divide my garments among them and for my clothing they cast lots." While we recognize this prophecy we might overlook the destitute here. To have everything taken from you including your clothing must be one of the greatest humiliations one could face. The shame of losing it all and being displayed naked in a public place is almost unfathomable for us to understand. Yet this is what David described and Jesus experienced.

One could easily conclude that the Psalmist has given up, that he thinks all is lost, he feels all alone, but that is not the case. Throughout the Psalm there is also a calling out to God and a belief that God is present and praiseworthy even in times of immense suffering. The Psalm concludes with these thoughts. It is good for us to hear this tonight as we gather on this Good Friday, for we too may be experiencing suffering in one form or another.

Chances are we know the scripture from John I just read a bit ago pretty well. Chances are we have heard it many times. Tonight however let's look closely at the last few verses and examine who was there and who wasn't.

Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, "Woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

How quickly things had changed! Just a few days before, Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem. Crowds were cheering him, palm branches were waving and being placed in His path. The Pharisees demanded silence to which Jesus replied, he silence the crowd, he had challenged them right back. "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out." Now the crowds were gone, his closest friends except one, the ones who followed and learned from Him for three year were gone: scattered, most likely hiding for their own protection. Peter, also called 'the rock' who had confessed, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" had denied Him three times. With the exception of a few faithful women and one disciple, the only ones who are crying out now are his enemies.

This is a good time for us to consider what we might have done on such a day. Think for a moment how you would have reacted. Chances are we would be like most of those first disciples. We would be afraid that people would recognize us as His followers.

I help teach a small confirmation group right now. We just finished up a chapter on the life of Jesus. The closing pages talked about the teachings of Jesus. We looked up specific verses and what Jesus had taught. Somewhere during the conversation I asked them, "Is it easy to follow what Jesus taught?" They thought for a moment and kind of hesitantly nodded their heads, "yes." Talk about a teaching moment.

So it's easy to love your enemies, forgive time and time again, turn the other cheek, and pick up your cross and follow me? Well, they got the point. But this got me thinking: Have we as parents, grandparents, teachers, ministers, and lay people made our young think that following Jesus is easy and convenient?

Many of us grew up in a time when belonging to a church and attending on a regular basis was the norm. Guess what? It ain't the norm anymore..... Have we become so complacent in our witness that we blend in with the crowds of our day? Are we like the people on the first Palm Sunday who were all for Jesus when things are going well and then abandon Him when things get tough?

These are good thoughts for us to consider this evening as we look at this scripture and see how most abandoned Him.

From the 23rd chapter of Luke we hear these words, “It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” When he had said this, he breathed his last. The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, “Surely this was a righteous man.” When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away. But all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.”

It’s interesting to read how Luke records what the Roman centurion concludes at the foot of the cross. Luke also records how the crowd reacted. Beating your breast was a way of showing deep sorrow and remorse often exhibited with Jewish tradition in mourning. This was a collective and a personal guilt. Now many of those present realized how they had followed the wrong crowd. They probably thought all was lost now that this man had been crucified.

Fast forward to today and our lives here in 2026, we know how Jesus died to fulfill the scriptures and become the sacrificial lamb for our sins. We know the joy of Easter and the promise it brings to our lives. Yet we will be tempted to follow the wrong crowds of our day. Jesus teaches in Matthew 7 verses 13 and 14 for us to enter by the narrow gate that is difficult but leads to life.

Our last hymn reminds us of that. The end of the 4th verse says it well: Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all. That is the challenge for us as we continue on our earthly journeys. May God help us in all times and places to feel His presence and love in our lives even when life is difficult or all seems lost. And may we do our part by not following the wrong crowds of our day. Amen.