

Fifth Sunday of Lent - Jesus is Condemned

March 18, 2018

Haven Lutheran Church, Hagerstown MD

Readings: Psalm 146; John 19:1-16a

(Much of today's sermon is based on the works of N.T. Wright and Barbara Brown Taylor. In a busy week of ministry, I give thanks and credit to these two stellar teachers, writers and preachers for their words and insights.)

Grace and peace to you from God - Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

In many museums in the world, you will find statues that date back to the Roman Empire. They came from all over the Europe, the Middle East and Africa — except for Rome itself. “The emperor and his family, after all, lived in Rome. There was less need for statues there. But out in the provinces... they put up statues. Larger-than-life images of the emperor and his immediate family. Why?”

“They put these statues up to *show the local people who their rulers were*. The Romans weren't the first or the last to do it. They set up likenesses, images of themselves, so that the local people could look at them and say to themselves: that's the man who rules over us. That's the man we owe allegiance to. That's the man who has brought peace and justice to the world. (And perhaps they might add, under their breath, That's the man we are paying high taxes to! That's the man whose army killed all our fighting men? That's the man we'd like to get rid of!)”

“The idea of someone putting an image of themselves in the country they rule” can cast a different light on the creation story in Genesis, chapter 1. “God creates the heavens and the earth. He makes the sea, the dry land, the plants, the fish, the birds and the animals. This is God's world. This is the world over which God now rules. This is the world God wants to respond to him with love and gratitude.”

“So God places, within this new world, an image, a statue of himself. Except, of course, because of who God is, it isn’t a statue made of stone or wood. It is itself a living being, like the animals but also unlike. This image is there for a purpose: so that, through this image, God can rule over his new world wisely and lovingly. And also that, in coming under the rule of this image, the creation can properly honour its creator.”

This image, of course, is the human race (Genesis 1: 26-28). In the image of God he made them; male and female he created them. And God gave them instructions to be fruitful and multiply, and look after the garden and the animals. Within the six day creation of Genesis 1, the human race is created on the sixth day, the Friday. After that, God rests. The work is complete.”¹ But the man, the woman decided not to live as the wise and loving image they were created to be. The man and the woman rebelled, turned away from God and their true selves. Yet God did not abandon them. God tried again and again to call the many ancestors of the man and the woman, us, back to whom and whose we were, so that the world would again know its loving creator and ruler.

This morning, in the gospel reading, “we find ourselves on a Friday morning, on the sixth day of the week, looking at the Roman governor and his peculiar prisoner. He lets the soldiers dress him up as a king — of sorts: the crown of thorns, and the slapping about the face, tell you what they thought of such a claim. And Pilate says the words that still haunt us: ‘Look! Here’s the man!’

“Here is the man!” Here is the true image of the true God. Here is the one who has brought God’s wisdom into the world. Here is the living embodiment of God, the one who has made the invisible God visible. Here is the king. Here is the breathing statue of the emperor-of-all, placed within the

emperor's world so that people could see who was their true master. And all his rebel subjects can do is mock, and slap, and scream for his blood.”

Here is the man who truly “reflects God into the world...”

But — and here is the new thing, the thing not mentioned in Genesis 1 — this, too, this misrepresentation, these accusations, this crown of thorns (the sharp bits of creation,,, drawing blood from creation's Lord), and the rest: all this is part of what it means to be God's image, **planted in territory which belongs to God but which is in rebellion against God**...When the living, loving God comes in person, in the person of his own son, to live among us rebels, in the world he made and still loves,... the appropriate form for him to take — the kind of living statue which will tell his subjects who he is... — is the form Jesus has now taken. The king of the Jews, crowned with thorns. The innocent king, the true man, the one who told the truth and was accuse of blasphemy. ‘Here's the man!’ Here's the true reflection of God. Look at this man, and you'll see your living, loving, bruised and bleeding God.” Not the kind of Messiah the Jewish leaders or mob want. Not the kind of king Pilate or the soldiers want. The very image and presence of God stands before all of them and they do not see.

The Jewish leaders only see a troublemaker. Jesus challenges their position and teachings. He stirs the waters and draws a God-centered, inclusive, non-violent and selfless image of what we were created to be. Whatever they saw in Jesus — God's image before them — it scared and angered them enough to shout the Roman emperor their king, when Scripture had been very, very clear that NO ONE was to get that kind of allegiance except the Lord their God.

Pilate sees the man and doesn't know what he is seeing. Pilate had his moments of wondering about Jesus — his strength, wisdom, stoic certainty — but not enough to risk empire-central hearing he didn't tend to a rebel-king. He caves to public pressure and sends Jesus off to be crucified even though he thinks him innocence.

Judas and the mob outside Pilate's palace seem to see Jesus as a disappointment. He let them down, so they betray him. The soldiers see "the man" as a job, an order they carry out without shouldering any personal responsibility.

No one sees the image of God — Son of Man, Son of God ---- in the man Jesus. "My kingdom is not from this world," Jesus has already told Pilate (John 18:36) His kingdom is God's kingdom — a world of justice, peace, enough, mutual respect, costly love and endless mercy — but those surrounding Jesus on that day want no part of such a kingdom or it's ruler. So they wanted Jesus killed. And Jesus did not resist.

Jesus could have chosen a way that did not lead to this terrible moment and death. "He could have stopped his teaching, or at least compromised on it. He could have exercised his privilege as the son of God, or he could have faded into the woodwork"² Gone back to Nazareth to live a quiet life. He could have but he did not "because that was not who he was. If anything, he was put to death for being completely who he was — the living image of God --- and for refusing to be less than who he was, which so offended the whole fallen creation that it conspired to wipe him off the face of the earth and did."

The WORD became flesh, and lived among us. The one who was with God, the one who *was* God, alongside the father and reflecting his character and love, became a human being. It was the most utterly appropriate thing that could have happened. It was like the sixth day of creation, only more so. But he was not received well among many. Who he was and whom he reflected was only accepted by a few who didn't fully understand. There are plenty of people we could blame for the death of Jesus — people just like us, people not sure if they want God to be who God is. Yet in the gospel of John, "it is Jesus' own magnificent will by which he offered himself to us then and offers himself to us still — a gift, a pardon, a release, a sacrifice, a meal — not to satisfy some cosmic bookkeeper in the sky but to leave no doubt about his feeling for us, [God's feelings for us.] By upending the cup that was handed to him, he made sure that wherever we go in this life and whatever happens to us, we a companion who has been there before us, who has done ferocious battle with all powers of darkness that try to separate us from God and from one another and *who has won.*"³ That is our Savior. Not a statue but the Word made flesh who shows us the love and plans of God. Now it is our turn. "This is the man." Emmanuel — God with us. Jesus — God saves. Here is God in flesh — in whose image WE were made. What will you do? What will we do? Amen

Linda M Alessandri 3/17/18

ENDNOTE

1. N.T. Wright, John for Everyone: Part 2 Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004 pp 118, 119

2. Barbara Brown Taylor, God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998 pp 98

3. Barbara Brown Taylor, God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998 pp 98, 99