

*Holy God, in this season of contemplation, help us to recognize that you revealed yourself in Jesus, who walked among us and was handed over to be crucified. May we be strengthened by his presence among us today. Amen.*

### **“A Sermon about Looking at Atrocities and Naming Them”**

I have a confession to make. Last week, today, and next Sunday is the first time in a very long time that I have preached sermons about the crucifixion of Jesus and the events leading up to it. I always chose the triumphant entry into Jerusalem over the passion of Christ. Good Friday services were Stations of the Cross or Tenebrae services – anything liturgical so that I would not have to share my thoughts about the crucifixion. Those thoughts were too personal. I preferred, instead, to focus on the life of Jesus, the love he shared during that life, and the presence of his spirit today.

You see, I don’t believe that Jesus wanted to die. I believe he accepted his death because he was unwilling to compromise his ideals. And I don’t believe that God wanted Jesus to suffer and die any more than God wants that sort of thing for you or me. I don’t believe that God chose Jesus die. For me, that’s an image of a heartless, frightening, and cruel god – a god that I refuse to worship. And if I hold these beliefs to be true, then it’s very hard for me to make sense of his death, to find anything redemptive about the cruelty of it all.

Last week Jesus was hauled off in the dead of night by military thugs who served under the Temple authorities – thugs who, no doubt, took delight in smashing their fist into his face during his interrogation by those authorities.

This week, the cruelty continues with a flogging intended not only to inflict excruciating pain, but to humiliate him as well. In fact, humiliation seemed to play a large part of the scene with the crown of thorns that was pressed into his scalp and the purple robe that was draped around his bloody body. Humiliation that included mockery and more face-smashing. And after all these horrible things had taken place, this bloody pulp of humanity was dragged out and put on display for everyone to see, along with an invitation to look upon him. “Look,” Pilate declares. “Here is the man.”

And if there is any relevance for me in this appalling scene, it is that we are also invited to look at the horrible things around us and to name them. Something that’s called prophetic witness. Theologian, Rebecca Parker, says, “Our times ask us to exercise our capacity for prophetic witness. By prophetic witness I mean our capacity to see what is happening, to say what is happening and to act in accordance with what we know.... It is the ability to name those places where we resist knowing what needs to be known.” In other words, as Christians, we are not only given the task to call the world out for its cruelty. We are also called to look closely and honestly at ourselves, at “those places where we resist knowing.”

Now, that resistance can play out in different ways, several of which we see in our scripture text. Last week we heard Pilate tell the Jewish leaders, “Take him yourselves and crucify him.” He was unwilling to be involved. This was a religious squabble in which he didn’t want to have any part. It didn’t concern him. And although it didn’t affect him personally, he had the power and privilege to pronounce life or death. But he refused to exercise that privilege.

I believe one of the most important voices calling us to exercise our prophetic witness, to call out the injustice where it’s happening and to look closely and honestly at ourselves – at “those places where we resist knowing” – is the “Black Lives Matter” movement. There is resistance. And part of that resistance stems from white people who, like Pilate, are unwilling to use our voices to save lives. Like Pilate, we pretend that the injustice which takes place around us doesn’t directly affect us, so we, too, turn away from it.

Pilate refused to use his power to do anything about the injustice that was taking place. Instead he repeatedly claims, “I can find no case against him.” Whether he was trying to convince others that his hands were clean or trying to convince himself, he seemed to feel that, as long as he had the right

views on the subject, his hands were clean.

This is the same reasoning of the white person who finds it insulting that they might be racist. They see racists as card-carrying members of the KKK. Racists are white supremacists who commit violent crimes against people of color. Racists intentionally harm others with their words and actions.

We white people shy away from the idea that we ourselves may be racist because we aren't like that. We are concerned citizens. We try our best to be good people, and the implication that we might have some racist tendencies – unintentional though it may be – is offensive to us. “Our hands are clean,” we declare maybe a bit too loudly.

Pilate eventually just gives into denial. He walks away from the whole thing. As he leaves the story, you can feel him putting the whole tragedy and injustice behind him. I imagine him as being fed up with the whole situation. He's tired of hearing the Jewish authorities harangue him with their charges against this man in whom he can find no fault.

This is called privilege. Privilege is when you're tired of hearing about the complaints of Black people, and so you turn the channel, scroll past the Facebook post, or tune out the pastor who is preaching about the sin of racism. Privilege is when I quit preaching about the injustices against Black lives because I decide I'm in need of some fresh material. Privilege is when I can step away from the reality that I live in a society where I am not the subject of extensive background checks when I apply for loans, and I can shop without fear of security tailing me. Privilege is when I'm asked to finish the sentence, “I am...” and my answer is “friendly,” or “unsure of myself,” or “the pastor of this church.” But my answer is not “white,” because it's a given; it's something I take for granted. That's privilege. I can walk away from race issues, while my Black sisters and brothers cannot. They live it. Every. Single. Day.

At the end of our story, we hear the Jewish leaders say “We have no king but the emperor.” This is nothing less than a flagrant disregard of the commandment to “have no other gods before me” – by religious leaders, no less – and it shows them as people who are all too willing to “go along with the system.” And why wouldn't they? After all, they benefit from it. These Jewish authorities were protected by Rome and allowed to continue their religion. Their privilege was guaranteed as long as they pledged their allegiance to Caesar and the empire for which he stood.

As a white person I also benefit from my station in life. If I wish, I can arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time. When I am told about our national heritage or about “civilization,” I am shown that people of my color made it what it is. I can swear, or dress in second-hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group. If a traffic cop pulls me over, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race. I can also be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me. (“White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” by Peggy McIntosh) These are just a few of the many perks and benefits I experience as a white person. And so I must answer the question of whether I am guilty, like the Jewish authorities, of pledging my allegiance to a social structure from which I benefit because of the color of my skin.

This week, we are told to look at something that we would really rather not see. When Pilate says, “Look, here is the man,” we would rather look elsewhere. Looking at these atrocities is a difficult undertaking. Looking at them and naming them for what they are may not sound important, but that's always where the un-doing and unraveling of injustice begins! James Baldwin said, “Not everything that is faced is changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

May God grant us the courage to unflinchingly look injustice square in the face, and not turn away. May we answer the call to prophetic witness: to see what is happening around us and to say what is happening, and “to name those places where we resist knowing what needs to be known.” Amen.