

The Love that Is Rejected
Luke 22:14-23:59

“They kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified, and their voices prevailed.”

“Who am I, that for my sake, my Lord should take frail flesh and die?” As Holy Week begins, I find myself, once again, struggling to understand why Jesus had to die. The reason cannot be known apart from the church inhabiting the story each Gospel writer tells. Mark is brutal toward the disciples’ failure, Jesus dying in complete dereliction, abandoned even by God. Matthew is haunted by refused responsibility: Judas returning the thirty pieces of silver; Pilate washing his hands of the matter; the disciples running for their lives. John alone portrays Jesus as the character in control of the action. Born for this hour, he goes forth to glorify God in his death and resurrection.

In ways had not realized, until this week, Luke’s passion differs significantly from the other three. In the first place, Luke rings the changes on Jesus’ innocence. Pilate finds no reason to arrest him. Herod initially plays along with his accusers, though finally Herod is said by Pilate also to find no reason to charge him. Pilate again tries to convince the crowd of his innocence, but to no avail. Only in Luke, one thief rebukes the other thief from his own cross saying “...this man has done nothing wrong.” And at Jesus’ death, the centurion is given the final word: “Certainly this man was innocent.”

If I were to guess why Luke is so insistent on Jesus’ innocence, I would say two things. First, he wants to take from us any reason we might offer to justify Jesus’ crucifixion. For Luke, there is no earthly reason to put Jesus to death. But more: I think Luke sees in Jesus’ death an end to the sacrificial system of ancient Israel in which an innocent victim—literally an unblemished goat for a guilt offering, a *scapegoat*—ritually bears the guilt of the people and dies. Jesus is that scapegoat—the final scapegoat—bearing the consequence of our separation from God in such a way that the separation is ended, once for all. We soon will borrow Paul’s words to say just how: not counting equality with God a thing to be grasped, he emptied himself...humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Still, if Jesus is innocent, and if those who wield the power of death in this ancient Roman province are not inclined to do more than flog him and release him, then according to Luke, how does he come to be the scapegoat? What of the role of the disciples in general and Judas, in particular? In Luke alone Jesus is tenderhearted toward the disciples. “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer,” he says. Likewise he declares, in the aftermath of their dispute about which of them is the greatest, “You are those who have stood by me in my trials.” Really? “I have prayed for you,” Jesus tells Peter, “that your own faith may not fail,” even as he predicts Peter’s devastating denial. When all of the disciples cannot keep their eyes open during Jesus’ agonizing prayer, Luke offers the kindly judgment that it was because of their grief. Jesus even interrupts Judas before he has a chance to kiss him. He sees and hears Peter deny him, then turns and looks at Peter (with love, I imagine) as the cock crows. Finally, Luke does not say, as Matthew, Mark and John do, that all the disciples forsook Jesus and fled. Other than Judas and Peter, he is silent about the disciples, who simply vanish from the story without a word. This writer, who would go on to record the story of the early church, surely wants to give the leaders of that church a little cover. In this Gospel, the disciples are seen through the eyes of love.

The only character left in our search for the cause of Jesus' death is the crowd. While he was still speaking to his disciples on the Mount of Olives, "a crowd came." I think it not by chance that Luke says nothing about who is in the crowd, only that Judas and the religious authorities were leading the crowd. After being questioned the next day by the council, "the assembly rose as a body" to accuse Jesus before Pilate. They did the same when he was brought before Herod. Finally when he is returned to Pilate, three times the crowd insists that the innocent one be crucified rather than a man who had been convicted of murder. "They kept urgently demanding with loud shouts," Luke writes, "that he should be crucified, and their voices prevailed."

"The desire to crucify," Sarah Miles wrote in response to Luke's Passion six years ago, "is the way of the crowd. A crowd has the power to make people feel less alone in the face of death. This is why," she said, "crowds are always at the heart of the violence done by religions and rulers....The crowd is seductive and shapes our worldly identities, through violence, casting-out and separation....The crowd helps frightened, isolated individuals identify with the power of Caesar, the power of the temple, the nation, the tribe."

Demagogues have gathered crowds throughout history, creating the illusion that they can make us great, make us powerful, make us winners, make us no longer vulnerable or weak or mortal. But more than pumping us up, they seduce us with the rhetoric of division and derision; they make of hope a zero sum game. Under their thrall, the crowd is granted the power to decide "who to judge, who to punish, who to scapegoat, who to allow into our body,"

Enter Jesus as the scapegoat. When W. H. Auden was asked why he was a Christian and not a Buddhist or a Confucian, he replied, "Because nothing in the figure of Buddha or Confucius fills me with the overwhelming desire to scream, 'crucify him.'" Get him out of here. Out of here! Get him out! We want to rid ourselves of the vulnerable, self-giving, self-emptying love that wordlessly judges our small minds, our hateful hearts, our fickle loyalties. A scapegoat is named, violence is provoked, the vulnerable other (racially, ethnically, physically, sexually, mentally, politically, theologically) is reviled, is blamed, is made to bear the guilt for our broken lives.

As we tell the story of Jesus' passion this year, we *are inhabiting it*; we are living it. For the one who comes to us still in the despised and rejected, in those who suffer and are acquainted with infirmity, in the stricken and afflicted by God, the one who comes to us in these is him who, once again, fills the crowd with the overwhelming desire to scream, "Get him out of here. Out of here! Get him out!"

"Why did Jesus die?" Robert Jenson asks after discounting every theological theory proposed in the history of the church. "Most directly stated," Jenson says, "the Crucifixion is what it cost the Father to be in fact—and not just...[in] somebody's...theology or ideology—the loving and merciful Father of the human persons that in fact [we are]. It is all very well to say that God is omnipotent Love; but here we sit in sluggish mutiny, stirring only to seize swords and staves....Christ's suffering is the anguish God undergoes [the anguish God is presently undergoing] to be actually merciful within history; it is the pain of truly loving us...."

"Forgive them, Father," Jesus says in Luke, praying for us all in the crowd, giving each of us the benefit of the doubt we do not deserve, "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." I hope, to God, he is right. Amen.