



**Mennonite
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Formation

Sermon

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Scripture Text: Mark 14:43 - Mark 15:47

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Rebellious Hope

Good Friday Sermon

We have gathered here today at the cross, together with the courageous women, as witnesses to a gruesome public execution, a politically motivated killing. And also with the devoted women who followed Jesus all the way to the cross, we are here a few hours later, holding vigil with the dead body of Jesus. On this dreadful day--it is not a good day--with those first dedicated onlookers, we look death squarely in the face, our hopes shattered, as we feel that dark power of death even invading our own being, while wondering if that power is what is truly supreme in this world.

Some years ago, when I was serving with MCC in the Philippines, I was leading a Bible study with ministerial candidates, focusing on the events of Holy Week. The group happened to be all men; and they all also happened to have been part of the underground resistance movement seeking to topple the regime of Ferdinand Marcos, propped up by a large superpower, and they continued to be involved with the movement committed to radical political change. So we came to the text about the desertion of all the male disciples, in contrast to the public commitment shown by the women disciples, all the way to the cross. I asked how we might understand that. Interpreting the text in light of their own experience, they offered that, well, it was simply far too dangerous for those in the next line of leadership; it would put themselves in the needless line of fire, to the point of being suicidal; it was for the sake of the ongoing success and guidance of the movement that the disciples needed to watch out for their own lives.

I happened to mention this explanation to my wife, and sometime later, when she was in a Bible study with women, that issue came up and

she asked about how they might assess the men's interpretation of the text. Well, of course, these women said, it was just like those men to think they were the really important leaders of the movement, using that as a smokescreen to play it safe; but really, those men were actually lacking in courage, not really able to stare down the barrel of a gun.

We are not here today to glorify suffering. And while we might want to jump to some happy ending, today the clock stands still. Dark Friday is still cold and ever darkening Friday. Today, with those first friends and followers, we are in shock, in grief, in disbelief, in doubt, in paralysis; in despair at the state of our world. But also with them, all we can do is look back at the amazing life that came to such a shocking end, remembering the courage and love of our dear brother, friend and leader, and drawing strength from his commitment to justice, compassion, peace, and mercy. And in that remembering of his life, we see glimmers of hope, perhaps not much more. Today is a day for sitting with grief, a day for doubt in solidarity with those who have lost all hope in the midst of the struggle for life and justice; it is not a day for passing on easy answers, or for passing on warm fuzzies after having been made to feel that we are all awful at heart, sinners in the hands of an angry God.

Rather, in our pain and grief, we remember the life of Jesus. We remember it with two main parts:

First, we are flooded with memories of his ministry centred in Galilee, focused on all the "sheep without a shepherd." We remember his teachings of love, even of the enemy, his welcoming of the marginalized and stigmatized,

his healing of those in distress, his solidarity with the poor, his constant demands for justice, and his sharp challenge to those with wealth and power. We remember that he literally and figuratively crossed borders, extending God's compassion outside the lands of the holy people. He was committed to being on the road, literally and figuratively, reaching out to people in need in the most unexpected of locations. And already, the puppet ruler of Galilee, Herod Antipas, son of the tyrannical Herod the Great, had sought to kill him, as he had earlier killed John the Baptist, because his sharp prophetic critique against the many injustices of his reign, and especially the exploitation of the poor and powerless.

And then, we remember his recent and intense ministry in Jerusalem, a week of protest and confrontation by day, and retreat at night with friends and supporters. We recall just 5 days ago his mass protest march on the holy city, as he ironically mimicked the arrival of the Roman military commander in full parade on the other side of the city about the exact same time, while also dramatically demonstrating his commitment to the contrary regime of lowly non-violence. And then there was his forceful action in the symbolic centre of power, prophetically announcing the overturning of the regime of the ruling oligarchy, which ultimately cost him his life. And when the inquisitorial representatives of the rulers were sent to interrogate him, he refused to back down, and continued his prophetic challenge, even subtly putting superpower Caesar in his place, claiming that even Caesar could never rival the true ruler of the universe.

Well, these are the kinds of protests that regularly result in executions, especially of leaders of movements working for a regime change. The historical record of Pontius Pilate outside the Gospels is that of a corrupt, violent, and Jew-hating ruler, whose regime was characterized by multiple extra-judicial killings, even against unarmed groups holding non-violent vigil, waiting and praying for dawn of the kingdom of God.

And now we must reflect more precisely as to who killed Jesus and why. Throughout that final week, and even in the weeks after his death, Jesus continued to be tremendously popular with the masses. We need to get rid of the myth of the back-stabbing Jewish masses, that the very people that on palm Sunday welcomed him, later demanded his death, because Jesus somehow failed to meet up with their expectations. This is not only very wrong, but also extremely dangerous. The crowd making claims on Pilate was an entirely different crowd. Just as now: Not all groups that come to the "ledge" [Legislative Building] in protest represent the same concerns.

Rather, Jesus was killed by the Roman imperial government, at the behest of their puppet, political rulers of the Judean state, who happened to claim chief priestly credentials. But having chief priestly credentials doesn't make one merely a religious figure. Even Caesar called himself "chief priest" of the empire, Pontifex Maximus; but you can't think of him as being primarily as being a religious figure. To say that it was simply "religious leaders" who killed Jesus is also both wrong and very dangerous. This was not a case simply of religious violence. It was not even the Pharisees, who later gave birth to the Judaism that survived after the first century. They were indeed vocal opponents of the radical program of Jesus, as a rival renewal movement that sought to reform society. But again, the Pharisees were not the group primarily responsible for Jesus execution. Finally, it is especially not the entire nation of Jews who were responsible for Jesus' death, as the Gospels attributed to Matthew and John seemed to suggest 50 years later, abetting the worst of Christian persecution of Jews in later centuries. Jesus and his movement were persecuted no more than some other Jewish reform and radical groups of the time, all by the ruling economic and political elite.

In short, Jesus died because he did the will of God, not simply because it was the will of God. It was, as Luke explains, as a consequence of his ministry of compassion and justice, his solidarity with the poor, his proclamation of peace, and his confrontation of the wealthy and ruling oligarchs, client rulers of a larger imperial system. Luke proclaims the cross not as the sacrifice of a human that somehow satisfies the justice of God; instead, deliberately avoiding that understanding, he sees the cross as the necessary outcome of the Messiah's earthly ministry, who was then vindicated by his resurrection.

It was not easy for those women to stand with Jesus at the cross. Crucifixion is one of the most gruesome forms of death. Eventually the body collapses on its own weight, and death comes with asphyxiation, as the lungs are crushed, sometimes after a number of days. Worse was the hideous aftermath: for full effect the Romans typically left dead corpses on the cross, to be torn apart by scavenging birds and dogs. But while shocking, more crucial is the purpose that crucifixion served the imperial and local rulers.

Crucifixion was not for so-called common criminals, but for political rebels and subversives. It was designed both as the ultimate humiliation of conquered peoples, and as a deterrent to ward off any designs by the conquered to reclaim lost freedom and shattered livelihood. And so crucifixions typically occurred in prominent

locations: on main thoroughfares, near city gates, or on rocky out crops. Crucifixion was the ultimate instrument of imperial terror and control.

It has been estimated that in the 50 years on each side of the crucifixion of Jesus, who was flanked by two freedom fighting rebels, around 10,000 Judeans suffered the same fate. That was in addition to the thousands killed in connection with armed resistance operations or in protest movements, many of them non-violent.

Empire may have a different face today, but on this day we would do well to contemplate how it

still operates in our own world, and how we unwittingly participate in it.

So, today we stand in solidarity with the women at the cross:

To do so is to put our own life on the line in the cause of God's gracious reign.

It is a public demonstration of the alignment of our life and commitments to those of Jesus.

To hold vigil with Jesus is to hold vigil in solidarity with and in memory of Jesus and his ministry, but also in solidarity with all victims of similar deaths.

As we hold vigil, and light candles, we pray with a rebellious hope in the midst of our despair.