

March 10, 2019 Crosswords Pt. 1 Matthew 26:30-35

Suddenly it is the season of Lent. Lent is defined as that time (40 days) from Ash Wednesday to the weekend whose focus is the celebration of Easter, the resurrection of Jesus. I say, suddenly it is Lent because it always surprises me, when it begins. What that really means is that by tradition Lent is a season observed more rigorously by our Roman Catholic and Anglican friends, who tend to recognize all of the church festivals throughout the year. For us it is a time when we turn our attention to the Biblical details around around the crucifixion and of course the resurrection.

This series will to the beginning of Holy Week. All of the texts we will study as part of this series will involve things Jesus said, knowing what was coming. Knowing what was going to occur. On the one hand they reveal HIS commitment to the task of redeeming the lost. On the other hand, they tend to reveal the frailty of the strongest follower. They expose the weakness of what we would often contend is "great faith." And of course it is in that light we develop anew our sense of need for Jesus, and the mercy to be found only in the grace of God.

This year our journey, because that is what it is, a pilgrimage, begins in Matthew 26 on the Thursday night of Holy Week. In fact, because of the way the Jewish people calculate days...from sundown to sundown...it is already the beginning, the first hours of Friday. The Last Supper has occurred. From the table scraps of that meal, Jesus has already given the disciples, and through them, given us, the sacrament of Holy Communion. Things happen fast. Details tumble together. When Jesus speaks, HE reveals HIS awareness of what has happened, and will happen, and how important these things are for God's grace to be poured out of humankind, and for the salvation of many.

They left the upper room led by our Lord, after they had sung a hymn. In my old KJV Bible, (the first Bible I owned, given to me by Barbara the year before we were married) there is a center column of Biblical references, and occasionally, an alternate translation of a word used in the text. In this case it clarifies the Hymn they sang. It was a Psalm, reminding us forever that in canon of Scripture, the Book of Psalms is in fact the Book of Praise. So they praised God as we do at the end of communion, and then they went for a walk, the Mount of Olives.

As they stood among the old Olive Trees, Jesus said this to the disciples: "This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'" We know that Peter, who was always quick to act and to speak, said he would never do so. In fact, he said, they may fall away, I never will. We know what happened. Jesus went on to say, that before the night was out, Peter would disown Jesus three times. And again Peter said, no way, never! In the tradition of the Church we remember Peter's denying that he knew Jesus. We remember Judas' betraying Jesus into the hands of those who wanted to see him die for 30 pieces of silver. But we tend to overlook, the fact of what Jesus said, and of what happened. "You will all fall away on account of me," and then Jesus told them what the prophet Zechariah had written in chapter 13, vs. 7: "Awake O sword

against my shepherd, against the man who is close to me! Declares the Lord Almighty. Strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered, and I will turn my hand against the little ones.”

We know that Peter refused to recognize what Jesus said. We know what happened next. In Matthew’s account It was in the garden of Gethsemane, that place where Jesus prayed that Judas arrived “with a large armed crowd”. When they tried to arrest Jesus, Peter, who was carrying a concealed weapon, struck of the ear of Malchus...servant to the High Priest. Jesus insisted Peter put up his sword and then Jesus healed Malchus. The arrest of Jesus occurred and then Matthew writes in verse 56, “Then all the disciples deserted him (Jesus) and fled. It was every man for himself. They fled into the darkness where they hoped they could hide. And to use another Biblical phrase, “they were sore afraid.”

That was what Matthew did, and John, yes, Peter too. Andrew for whom this church and so many others are named. James, son of Zebedee, Philip and Bartholomew, Thomas, and the other James, son of Alphaeus. Thaddaeus and Simon the Zealot. In all probability the list included Luke the physician and Mark the teenager. They all, whoever was there in Gethsemane, whoever was there at the Last Supper in the upper room...deserted Jesus and fled. Anyone who knows the terrors and understands anything of the agony of crucifixion would have done the same. It was sensible. It was about survival. And it was not about faith. In fact it brings to mind the title or a Roy Orbison song, “It’s Over.”

Of course all of that is history. Matthew among others share it with us for a single reason. The Gospel of Matthew is not about Matthew. Or Peter. Or any of the others. The Gospel of Matthew, as the Gospel of Mark, and Luke and John...are about Jesus. The crucifixion happened. Jesus died. Jesus was entombed. And on the 3rd day, Jesus rose from the dead. That too is history. And anyone who visits Israel in the 21st century, and the city of Jerusalem in particular is bombarded by that reality...these things happened. The places are marked in that ancient city. To deny they happened is as foolish as to deny that Ceasar crossed the Rubicon, or that the holocaust happened or World War II.

But that is not the issue this morning. That is not the issue as we enter into the time, the season known as Lent. There is another question that hangs in the air. It is a real question and it involves a real issue. How will we handle circumstances which befall us, when it is suddenly hard to see that the Sovereign Almighty God is with us? How will we handle terror? Or any other challenge we perceive as a real threat to our faith? What will we do when we are really afraid?

I want you to hear me and remember this: Jesus told the disciples gathered round HIM, (HIS disciples) they would all fall away. In fact the Bible foretold their being scattered as precisely this: a crisis of faith. Do not be surprised if it happens to you. Never say, ‘it could not happen to me.’ Try to remember what Jesus said. It can happen. It did happen. And it may happen. It is false pride, pride that leads to a falling, that causes some to say, never here. Not me. Never. And if there is an antidote for the crisis of such a time and such circumstances it is

and will only be the ability to remember what Jesus said. An assault on God, has affects on us. Crises of faith....are real.

I said and I meant, if there is an antidote it is remembering Jesus and remembering the grace of God that redeems. Peter and Thomas offer us the greatest hope if we are ever so tried by life's circumstances. Jesus always receives with mercy, God always receives with mercy, the one who has sinned and fallen away, who has the common sense to return. In fact the falling away is probably not the worst thing that can happen. What is tragic about Judas is not that he betrayed Jesus, but that he took his own life instead of repenting and returning in the humility of one who needs to be forgiven. As Al Hibler taught us in his great song of faith, "He'll always say, I forgive." And of course the title of that song is, I Believe.

My word of encouragement to you this morning is this. I know I am not stronger than those who were with Jesus in Gethsemane. It is not whether or not we will stumble and fall, the question is will we have the faith after having done so to say with Peter... "Lord, you know I love you." Or to say with Thomas, regardless of what else we have said, "My Lord! My God."

Let us pray;

Lord we like to believe our faith is strong. We also recognize that when tested some people are broken. There are bullets that will pierce armor plate. And we have been reminded of the frailty of the disciples who walked with you. We pray, do not let us come to a time of hard testing. We pray that we might keep our eyes on the prize, being with YOU. If we do fall, tenderize our hearts and souls that we would seek your mercy. In Jesus name we pray. Amen