

Weekend of the Passion (RCL/C): The Greatest Story Ever Told

Luke 22:1-23:56

April 13-14, 2019

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

What or who has touched your heart in the Passion story this year? What in the old story has grabbed you in a new way? What detail makes you wonder? What development gives you pause? What did you seem to hear for the first time, even though this is probably the umpteenth time you've heard Luke's telling of the tale?

How would you rewrite the story? I'd have Judas refuse to betray Jesus, Peter refuse to deny Jesus and be quick to acknowledge Him. I'd have Pilate stick by his guns, standing by Jesus' innocence. After all, he's on record saying several times that he found no basis for the charges brought against Jesus, that there was no evidence of a crime deserving death. I'd also have the crowds continue to be a buffer between the religious leaders and Jesus, as they had been before Holy Week, instead of becoming a lynch mob yelling, "Give us Barabbas! Crucify Him!"

This is a story that gets us in the gut. For me, the most powerful verses describe what happens after Peter denies knowing Jesus:

The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he said to him, "Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly. [He went out and cried and cried and cried. The Message] (Luke 22:61-62)

So it is that Jesus' prophecy at the Last Supper came true:

"Simon, Simon, listen! [Simon, stay on your toes.] Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, [Satan has tried his best to separate all of you from me, like chaff from wheat] but I have prayed for you [in particular] that your own faith may not fail [that you not give in or give out]; and you, once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers [turn to your companions and give them a fresh start. The Message]." (Luke 22:31-32)

Only St. Luke has Jesus talking about Simon falling before temptation, heading in the wrong direction, then turning back again (literally, **repenting**), and proceeding to strengthen and encourage the others.

In AA and other 12 Step circles, who can best minister to those who need to get into recovery? Addicts who are **in** recovery. In faith circles, who can best minister to sinners? Sinners who are “in recovery,” those who have fallen to temptation, headed in the wrong direction, then had a course correction by God’s grace, and turned back again. None of us is ever “fully recovered,” but each of us is always in the process of recovering from sin, the most powerful addiction of all.

Someone has said that a build-up of **resentment** toward those who colluded to have Jesus executed and those who cooperated with them is not the optimal outcome of hearing this Passion story. Nor is mere **sentiment**: sadness over the injustice of it all, horror over the bloodiness, shock at the betrayals, denials, desertion, of even those closest to our Lord. Neither resentment nor sentiment but **repentance** is the proper and life-giving response to hearing the Greatest Story Ever Told.¹

We all fall off the wagon of grace, repeatedly. Our sin is as responsible for Jesus’ death as the jealousy of the religious leaders, the cowardice of Pilate, the apathy of Herod, the fear of the disciples. Our Lord Jesus didn’t save **Himself** by eluding crucifixion, by escaping the cross, because His mission was to save **us**. The thief hanging next to Him on the cross, begging for mercy, is a stand-in for all of us.

Like Peter, we find endless ways to deny our Lord. God-willing, when we realize what we have done to distance ourselves from Him, we feel His gaze upon us, we cry and cry and cry, then we turn back again to strengthen each other.

It was never Jesus’ fate that hung in the balance in the course of the Passion story. It is everybody else’s, including ours.²

¹Fred Danker, *Jesus and the New Age* (St. Louis: Clayton, 1972), p. 237.

²David L. Tiede, *Luke* (Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), p. 372.