

Sermon
Sunday of the Passion
St. Andrew's, Methuen
March 28, 2021
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Isaiah 50:4-9a
Psalm 31:9-16
Philippians 2:5-11
Mark 14:1-15:47

Remember that picture from psychology class that at first glance is a vase; but then with some prodding from others, **our vision shifts** and the vase turns into a picture of two people facing each other?

I want to suggest that Jesus on the cross provides a similar dual picture.

At first glance we see an itinerate rabbi and healer being executed by Empire, something which Rome is really good at:

Remember Spartacus, the Roman slave, who leads a revolt against the Empire 100 years before Jesus? (You might remember the 1960 movie) The revolt ends in a final bloody battle in which the slaves are defeated. But since Empire is never satisfied with just winning, along 130 miles of the Appian Way, stretching from Rome towards Naples, Rome crucified 6000 followers of Spartacus. **That's one cross every 40 yards.** The Day the Revolution Began, by NT Wright— page 57

Then 36 years after Jesus, Empire finally has enough of Jewish rebellion and crucifies so many Jews they run out of wood.

Crucifixion is not just about killing, but about scapegoating: Naked Jews hanging in plain view announce that they are the cause of all our problems and therefore deserve this horrible fate.

And as the community join in this scapegoating, they are brought closer together, having shared in this traumatic cleansing of their world.

This explains the sense of fellowship that falls over a lynch mob once they have enjoyed watching the black man become the strange fruit hanging in the tree at the end of a rope.

Scapegoating rids us of our enemies and brings us together as a community.

Jesus allows this to happen to him in order to reveal the scapegoating mechanism. So when we scapegoat those who are different from us--Muslims, Jews, Asians, LGBTQ, immigrants, people of color, the Crucified Jesus says, "**Look at me and see the horror of what you're really doing.**"

That's why John the Baptist says, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" Not sins but sin: in Christ Crucified the scapegoating mechanism, the sin of the world, is broken open and robbed of its power.

In our first glance at the cross, we see who we are and what we've done. We are broken men and women who destroy others in order to feel better about ourselves.

But then we shift our focus and instead of seeing broken humanity on the cross, we see God.

We see God entering the depths of human suffering; God not only experiencing the **physical horrors** of torture and dying naked in plain view, but God also experiencing the **psychological horrors** of humiliation and abandonment.

We see the Crucified God experiencing the suffering of the world—that knows well the cry, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me!"

Paul says: "though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped,

but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross."

 But think about that—do we really want a God who hangs on a cross? Don't we want an all-successful God? "Oh, yes, let's join the Jesus parade as he enters the city to take on Empire. Pass the palm branches—isn't this exciting. Glad it's such a pretty day!

But soon enough **the crowd cries "Crucify him, crucify him!"**

And Peter, as Jesus turns from superstar to scapegoat, drops his palm branch and says, "**I do not know the man!**"

On the cross we see ourselves and we see God. To see both is to know what the Centurion knows: Truly this man is God's Son.

“Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

I was on retreat at the Jesuit Campion Center in Weston, sitting in a makeshift chapel in the nursing home wing, waiting for the service to begin and I realize **Jesus on the cross has his hands extended, not in defeat, but in welcome**, like parent or grandparent opening their arms to embrace their child.

Jesus does not go to the cross to change God’s mind about us.
In spite of the evil we are capable of, God loves us from the foundation of the world. God does not need to be bought off with a blood sacrifice to accept and forgive us.

Jesus does not go to the cross to change God’s mind about us.

**Jesus goes to the cross to change our mind about God,
so we might run into his loving embrace.**