

Readings: Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12; Psalm 22; Hebrews 10:16-25; John 18:1 – 19:42

This is not the way we planned it. This is not what we expected... just a few days ago, our voices with the shouts of the crowd crying as if our lives depended on it, “Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the LIVING GOD! Hosanna!” Hosanna, which means, “save us.” When we asked to be saved, to be delivered, to be rescued – this was not what we had in mind.

We knew, that day, that even as the One we hoped to be our Messiah, our king, our Lord, even as This One processed into Jerusalem on a donkey; we knew, that, there was another procession entering Jerusalem through a different way. Rome’s procession. Not Caesar himself, but his agent, Pilate, coming down to keep order as the pilgrims gathered. “Crowd control for Passover.” We had in mind there would be a show down, we almost expected a fight, we planned maybe even to die. This is not what we expected, when we asked to be saved, to be delivered, to be rescued – this is not what we had in mind.

Our leader, our Messiah, (our God?) nailed to a tree, slowly suffocating, calling with God-forsaken voice, “I’m thirsty.” No, this is not the way we planned for, when we cried, “Hosanna – Save Us!” this is not what we had in mind. I suppose, next time, we will be more careful how loud we shout for salvation.

It’s hard to take. These soldiers bickering over their gambling prize, this innocent man’s clothing – his last, his only remaining possession. It’s hard to take, the lack of pity, the irony of religious leaders arguing over proper grammar. “Shall we write on the sign ‘Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Judeans’? or shouldn’t it actually be ‘This man *said*, I am the King of the Judeans’?”

As we try to spit out the taste of this irony, the lack of pity, the mockery – bitter as a sponge of sour wine on our tongues – we have to ask, indeed, what kind of a King is this? What kind of a God would allow this? And how could this be a Messiah who would have anything to do with salvation, rescue deliverance?

This is not the kind of king we cheered for earlier in the week. This Messiah doesn't seem to be accomplishing anything. And this is not the kind of God we want to worship. If this is God, it is a pitiful God, too painful to watch. This is not the way we planned things.

Was it really our voices that cried out, "Crucify him!?" Surely there's someone else to blame for this pitiful mess. Was it really our voices that cried out, "Release Barabbas!" Bar Abbas – "Son of the Father." Maybe Pilate didn't understand which Bar Abbas, which "Son of the Father" we were asking to be released. By then things were already out of hand. And this is not what we had in mind. Not at all.

So maybe, as we travel home this dark evening, we will try just as those followers of Jesus likely did... to put the cross as far behind us as possible. Try to hide it in a corner, in a crook of our minds where we won't have to share any part of its pity or pain.

Maybe as we travel home this dark night, to avoid the passion narrative – to avoid that cross – we will turn to the words of our other readings from Isaiah, from Hebrews. The author of Hebrews has pleasant things to say, after all... that Jesus is like a great priest over the house of God, the Temple. And the author uses words and images that remind us of a *system of sacrifice*. A system where people bring before God a sacrifice and there on an altar the sacrifice is given, is offered to please God.

But the cross. Jesus hanging there. Is it impossible to hide from this image? Impossible not to share some part of its pity this dark night? So we have to ask the author of Hebrews, "What kind of a *sacrifice* could this be? How could this *please* God?" This is not the way we would plan it, this is not what we would have in mind at all.

And the author of Hebrews seems to respond to our question. The author of Hebrews would seem to say, "Yes, that's right – it *isn't* the way you would plan it, this *isn't* what you would have in mind at all. If it were up to you, you'd set up your worship, your lives, and your whole world under a system of sacrifice. *Because you can't let go of control*. No, if it were up to you, you'd keep coming to the altar and as long as you followed the rules and regulations and the offering you brought was perfect (if you could figure out how to make that happen); then, you would go on thinking you were in God's favor. That you'd earned God's righteousness."

But it isn't up to you and this isn't what **GOD** has in mind at all. No! *Because* God is merciful, abounding in steadfast love, *this* is what God has in mind – God's plan is to turn our systems of sacrifice, turn them inside out and nail them to a cross. God replaces sacrifice with sacrament.

With sacrifices we might tremble in pity or fear before an altar, hoping we "get it right." In sacraments we gather around a bath to be washed and God shows up with water and a promise... Or we gather around a table to be fed and God shows up with a meal and a promise.

With a sacrifice, we generally do the work to try to please God. But with and in and through a sacrament, God presents us with God's presence, God's grace and God's abundance through plain old earthly "stuff." Stuff like water, bread and wine. God *comes to us* with and in and through flesh and skin, blood and body.

But there it is again, the cross doesn't stay hidden in that crook of our minds for long. Jesus hanging there pitifully. And we say again, now in disbelief, "This isn't what we planned, what we expected, what we had in mind." Knowing that before the night is over, we will look up at that cross to see, after that last stubborn moment of death, pierced by the soldier's spear, spilling from the side of Jesus, blood and water. Those essentials of life. Given. Broken. Shed. For you. And we might just barely endure the cross when the words ring in our ears like soft bells, "This is my body. Broken for you. This is my blood. Shed for you."

It's not what we expected. It isn't what we planned or had in mind. And our first reading from Isaiah would seem to add, "No, that's right. This *isn't* what you had in mind, this *isn't* what you planned or expected. If it were up to you, the Messiah would come like Rome came into Jerusalem. With a legion of armies. With soldiers and spears. With weapons of mass destruction. With machines that do the killing for us. With a system, with a *cycle* of violence that only begets more violence."

And the prophet Isaiah, taken as a whole, begs us, "Aren't you tired of the violence? Aren't you tired of the war? Aren't you tired of the useless loss of life?"

“No, this isn’t what GOD has in mind at all. No! *Because* God is merciful, abounding in steadfast love, *this* is what God has in mind – God’s plan is to turn our system of war, our cycle of violence in upon itself and hang it on a cross. God replaces a cycle of violence with a suffering servant that offers us a system of SHALOM – a system, literally, of wholeness, healing, justice, peace.”

And so, it is as if Jesus throws his very body onto the giant gears that move history; and all of creation – even the teeth of time itself – grinds to a silent halt.

“No,” Isaiah proclaims, “this Messiah isn’t what you expected at all. This Messiah, this leader, this king, brings healing out from underneath the shadow of suffering. This Messiah is so full of merciful love and compassionate embrace, that the way of humility and forgiveness are wedged into the gears of violence and they are ground into SHALOM, like a spear being hammered into a farm tool.

But that spear. Our hearts, our minds, they drift back again to the cross. Jesus hangs there pitifully. We say again in disbelief, “This isn’t what we planned, this isn’t what we expected or what we had in mind.” Knowing those last words we hear from the cross at that last stubborn moment of death will echo all night long – “It is finished.” It is fulfilled. And “In this way,” God would seem to say, “I satisfied a world that wasn’t expecting it, I am bringing fulfillment to a world that didn’t plan for it, I will bring shalom to a world that has only violence in mind.”

But the cross. Jesus hanging there. Is it not impossible to hide from its shadow? Is it impossible not to share some part of its pity this dark night? And we say again, maybe with barely a whisper, “This is not what we had in mind, not what we planned, not what we expected...”

And God would seem to speak, but barely a silent whisper in, with and to those parts of our souls, buried in the despair of the cross, “This is not what I had in mind either. But this is what has come. And I am planning, I will plan, I have already planned a way to break into this world of death, of violence, of sacrifice. If you expect nothing else, expect me to bring about something new. Hope. Just wait...”