

St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church sermon for Palm/Passion
Sunday 2020: "dirty politics"

Based on chapters 26 and 27 in the Gospel of Matthew

I'll begin this sermon by discussing something I know you all are just dying to hear about because you don't get it anywhere else: dirty politics, chaos, and fear! Hearing about that is exactly why you tuned in for church this Sunday, right?

Now before you cut the sermon off right here and now, give it just a few more minutes. I'm going someplace good with this. I promise.

We don't need to look very hard these days to find dirty politics, chaos, and fear do we? And no one can claim immunity. Everyone's got their hands in it. The way this coronavirus pandemic is playing out is just shining an even brighter light on what was always there.

The first problem is that there's no agreement even on basic facts. Things that one would think are beyond interpretation, such as simple statistics about how many people are infected in various parts of the nation and the world, are points on which there's no widespread agreement. What the basic facts are in our minds depends more on which news outlets we've chosen to trust than it does on the facts themselves.

And as soon as we enter the realm of things that are analysis and interpretation of the facts, it gets even worse. So many seem to be opportunists, using a chaotic moment like this to advance a

personal agenda, and even if this isn't the case everyone seems to be getting accused of opportunism by somebody else.

And then of course there's the elevation of emotion. There is seemingly no end to the voices telling us we should be terrified, even that being terrified is what marks us as good citizens, but there's little rational discussion of what exactly it is that is supposed to be terrifying us.

Any sense of calm rationality, of commonwealth, of mutual prosperity, of interconnectedness gets lost in this mess.

But guess what?! This is nothing new.

Jerusalem in the year 30 AD was a world of dirty politics, chaos, and fear just as much as the world we're facing today. Just listen for a moment to the Passion story we just heard. There's dysfunction right and left!

The arrangement of power is bizarre to put it lightly. The Temple has a hierarchy and authority, usually referred to in the Gospel as the Chief Priests. While politically fairly weak, the Temple authorities routinely collect taxes from worshipping Jews and have their own police force. Then there are the "Scribes and Pharisees" upon whom Jesus so often casts aspersions. These people have no formal authority but are seen as leaders because of their high degree of intellectual rigor and piety, respectively. Then there's Herod, the nominal king of the region who fancies himself a despot. But where the real power lies, and everyone

seems quite clear on this point, is in the Roman governor and his legions. Although the texts we have inherited mostly avoid making this point directly, no one has any doubt that it is Pilate who has the ultimate say in all matters. It's a very odd situation, as even though he and all the trappings around him are considered ritually unclean, fear of him and what he might do is a gigantic silent factor in everything that occurs.

And it is within this very strange power structure that the drama unfolds. The Temple authorities and religious establishment want Jesus dead, and perhaps not for entirely malicious reasons. Jerusalem in the first century is a tinderbox, and a charismatic leader who rallies and unites a large group of people around anything other than the Roman colonial system might just spell annihilation for the whole region. Regardless of why they want him dead, they feel caught between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, a large enough number of the common people have come to believe that Jesus is who He claims to be that they can't simply discredit him and take him down the simple way. Also, they have no real legal authority to mount a death-penalty case against him. Rome alone can do that, a fact that Pilate makes very clear during Jesus' trial.

So, they contrive about as underhanded a means as possible to achieve their goal. Waiting until the eve of Passover, the holiest days in the Jewish year, they pay one of his own to betray him by bringing a ragtag contingent of soldiers and police to arrest him by night in an out-of-the-way spot. This places both Pilate and crowd in a position where maximum influence is possible, as justice must be dispensed swiftly due to pressures on both Pilate and the

public. The influence works, and Jesus is sent to the Cross less than 24 hours after his arrest.

Does this kind of environment sound at all familiar? Truth is completely relative. Facts are irrelevant. Status is everything. The crowd is swayed much more by emotion than logic. And, most significantly, everyone is jockeying for power under the shadow of a dreaded common external enemy.

Sounds a little too much like right here, right now, doesn't it??

But maybe, just maybe, that's actually wonderful news.

Because let's never forget what, from the cosmic perspective, actually happened during that fateful week in Jerusalem nearly 2000 years ago. The curse of humanity's age-old self-loathing, self-destructive bent was taken on fully by none other than the Creator of the Universe, and we were told we never need to bear it again. Thanks to what Jesus did, we can stand on the wreckage of history, on the wreckage of our own lives, and laugh in victory, knowing that both the guilt and shame that come from within and the insults that come from without are powerless to hold us down.

Put plainly, God's mighty acts of salvation happened right smack-dab in the middle of a mess of dirty politics, chaos, and fear, a mess that in so many ways parallels our own time and place. I don't believe this is a coincidence. Maybe it's God's way of showing off, but whatever the motive it is a remarkable source of comfort and encouragement.

In humanity's darkest moments, the ones that from our perspective are disasters beyond redemption, God preforms the greatest miracles of all.

As you move through this Holy Week, I invite you to contemplate the Passion story deeply. Read it or listen to it many times. Let it turn this way and that in your mind, and examine it from many angles. Read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest it. And then let your contemplation slowly migrate from first-century Jerusalem to our current time and place. Examine it from many angles as well, in light of the incredible story of Christ's Passion. I trust that in doing so you will arrive in a place where fear and despair are not the responses fitting to the current situation. Rather, expectancy is. Expectancy that God is performing a miraculous unlike any we have ever seen before. Watch, my friends, and see what that might be.