**Reading 1: Peter’s Denial - Mark 14:26-31, 66-72**

We will all betray our Lord.

Just saying that I imagine in many of us the internal monologue immediately jumped up “I will not!” Mine still does. And then I do.

This is the things about the way of the cross, it makes cowards of us all. One moment we are full of fight, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never deny you.” And the next we are saying “I don’t know what you are talking about.” If we think we can stand on our own power. We won’t. If we think we can by might overcome, we can’t. If we are thinking of martyrdom as some kind of glory, it isn’t. The way of the cross is loss.

It is the loss of the glory story. It is the loss of personal pride. And ultimately the cross is the loss of the self. And if you are anything like Peter – who always struck me as a classic grinder – a guy who never met something he didn’t think couldn’t be beaten with perseverance and brute force if necessary – it is tougher. Because the way of the cross has to break you.

Because if you think you are getting out of this life a winner, you lose. If you think you can walk the way of the cross in your own strength, you can’t. We will all betray our Lord. Whether that betrayal is the common sins that afflict us all, or whether that betrayal is the exhaustion of the grinder who eventually realizes the grind doesn’t work. “He broke down and wept.”

The sheep will be scattered. The question is, after being scattered, will you hear the voice of the shepherd calling you back. To walk the way of the cross, not in your own strength, but by the grace of Christ who walked it first.

**Reading 2: Gethsemane – Mark 14:32-42**

“The Spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak”

As a Protestant and bible reader I’ve always been perplexed by this saying. Because it breaks some of the theology. If we are talking about our own Spirit, good protestant doctrine says that it is fallen. Our Spirit isn’t willing. If we are talking about the Holy Spirit, the gift of God, it isn’t Pentecost yet. And even if we are just talking about the spirit of faith, the passion story is the one that reminds us none of the disciples got it until the resurrection. Whatever they might have been believing in, the cross crushed all that. It was only after Easter that a truer faith came.

But the theme I want to ponder on this night is the Way of the Cross. If we have been broken, like Peter, from trying to walk it under our own strength, we are talking about the Holy Spirit taking residence and helping us in our need. That Spirit definitely is willing. That doesn’t make the way of the cross easier. And what Jesus is always warning about in his later parables is to watch…to stay awake.

Maybe even more so to a church in a long end of history grown sleepy. The master of the house has been delayed a long time. That’s what Jesus would say in one of those parables. And the servants of the house have taken to using it for their own purposes. Some to drink the best wine. Some to sleep late. Others to beat the other servants. The servants that started out with the best of intentions gave in to weakness of the flesh.

“When he returned to them again, he found them sleeping, for they couldn’t keep their eyes open. And they did not know what to say.” That is not a bad description of us stumbling along the way of the cross. In another parable all 10 virgins waiting fall asleep. Most of us will fall asleep.

But the Spirit is willing. The Spirit that rested right now upon Jesus. The Spirit that will keep us in the true faith. The Spirit that will raise us on the last day. Today, keep watch and pray. But even more, have faith. The Spirit who have begun this good work will see it to completion. Which is no longer this weak flesh, but the resurrection body.

**Reading 3: The Arrest & Betrayal - Mark 14:43-52**

Jesus’ reaction to those who have come to arrest him contrasts two things. “Am I some dangerous revolutionary?” vs. “Why didn’t you arrest me in the Temple?” It is a contrast of the temporal and the eternal.

The revolutionary wishes to overturn the temporal order. The revolutionary wants regime change and new powers. Revolutionaries come in all kinds of flavors. The ones in our day usually drape themselves in “the power of the people,” but that isn’t always that way. There are revolutionaries who just as easily drape themselves in “the mandate of heaven.” Jesus’ question seems rhetorical in this. They have come with clubs and swords to arrest a temporal revolutionary, but that is not Jesus.

Jesus didn’t really care about the temporal palaces be they Caesar or Herod or the High Priest. Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s. Jesus cleansed the temple. Jesus cared about the eternal. He was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary in order to reveal to us the Father. In order to make peace where sin had brought eternal rebellion.

If they wanted to arrest him it should have been in the temple about the eternal. And it wasn’t for lack of trying. They tried to test him. He took on all comers in this week. And the crowds only grew larger around him. So they settled on this cowardly way…with a kiss.

But Jesus would walk the way of the cross. He would walk this so we might know the full revelation of the Father’s love and eternal plan. That none of the powers that be, are the power. And that power has come not with clubs and swords, but full of grace and truth.

**Reading 4: First Trial – Mark 14:53-65**

Beria, the original head of the Soviet KGB, had a phrase, “Show me the man and I’ll tell you the crime.” That is what Jesus is confronted with here. “The entire high council were trying to find evidence against Jesus, so they could put him to death.” The problem is that when you try to go about “justice” that way, everyone can see it. Nothing ever makes sense. The people you parade in tell conflicting stories. Many of them are just made up to get the bride. The one’s that are based on actual things often make the accused look better. And Jesus the entire time just stays silent. There is nothing he could say that would be a better defense than the corrupt clown show.

But the point of Beria’s saying isn’t about trials, it’s about outcomes. It’s about power. What power wants, power normally gets. And they wanted Jesus dead. That’s what Caiaphas’ exasperation is about when he stands up and yells at Jesus, aren’t you going to say anything? And the answer is simply no, because there is no true charge.

But then Caiaphas asks the question, “Are you the messiah, the son of the blessed one?” Of course Caiaphas things he’s the one sitting the judge’s seat. He thinks that whatever Jesus answers he will get the final say. But this is the question the Way of the Cross places before all of us.

Jesus answers with the truth. “I AM. And you will see the Son of Man in the place of power at God’s right hand and coming on the clouds of heaven.” Now as a preacher I’ve asserted that is the truth. That is part of what I’m here to proclaim. But that is the question and the answer of this age. Is this Jesus the one? Is this Jesus THE judge?

The basis is the judgement? Do you believe his testimony.

The religious power of the day did not and issued their judgement. They found the crime. And as power always thinks, they can easily make the truth disappear. Power always thinks they can make their own truth. And they often can, for a time. But truth is a strange thing. It keeps coming back. You beat it up, and its beauty shines through.

Truth suffers the way of cross, because by it power is convicted. Power might win a day, but the Son of Man comes on the clouds of heaven.

**Reading 5: Pilate Trial – Mark 15:1-15**

The religious power didn’t have the authority to do what they wanted – to kill Jesus. They had to run it through the civil power – Pilate.

Now my meditation on Pilate is usually a little different. Because I tend to take Pilate as representative of the best of us, of humanity. Roman law was something good. If you had to be tried by anyone prior to English common law you’d pick a Roman trial. The Jewish religious trial had already come to the wrong conclusion. They’d shown themselves to be corrupt. But the biblical witness is that we all failed. Which is the purpose of the second trial. Will the best of the gentile world do any better?

And the picture of Pilate in the gospels it both better and far worse than Caiaphas. Pilate is not running a Kangaroo court, at least at the start. And it doesn’t take Pilate long to figure out that Jesus has done nothing. The only charge that Pilate is interested in is this “King of the Jews” one. Which is a way of asking “Are you a revolutionary?” Which Jesus is not. At least not against the temporal powers to the extent they want to the truth.

And Pilate sees the truth as far as he is able to. But the best of human law caves to the primal cry of power. He doesn’t issue the right judgement, but begins to negotiate. And the second you begin to negotiate on truth, is the second you lose all truth. Who should I release – Jesus, the King of the Jews, or Barabbas – the Son of the Father? Do I give you the true son, or the false son? And the mob, that primal power, screams Barabbas.

But maybe not all is lost, maybe the mob will recognize the error of their rulers. What do I do with Jesus? Crucify!

And once he’s traded the truth away, he’s traded any claim to judgement he has. In pure cowardice he hands Jesus over.

The way of the cross always walks through such failed human hopes. No man-made or man-run institution can save. Even the best crumble.

**Reading 6: The Crucifixion – Mark 15:21-41**

The way of the cross ends of course ends at the cross itself. And it is at the foot of the cross that we see the great division. You have the Roman soldiers who are just doing their duty nailing him to the tree while stripping him of his last possession and gambling over it. You have the ruling nailed above him that Pilate knew was a farce. The actual revolutionaries to each side. People passing by engaging in the casual cruelty of mocking the condemned. The Chief Priests recycling the false testimonies. Even the cry of dereliction is mocked. “Let’s see if Elijah comes!” It like a Hieronymus Bosch painting of a carnival of cruelty. As Savonarola’s hymn asks, “do we pass that cross unheeding breathing no repentant vow?” This motley assortment high to low finds nothing but infinite jest in the cross. No pathos, no thoughts about how easy it was or how easier it would be to convict them, no quiet of the graveyard. Just mocking.

Yet there are others who have walked the way of the cross. The Centurion who sees the scene as testifies, “This man truly was the Son of God.” The women, watching from a distance, who had walked all the way from Galilee with him. And many others from Jerusalem. The text doesn’t say it, but Joseph of Arimathea had to be close to know to go to Pilate. John’s gospel puts one disciple there.

The cross is the great division. Who is this one? What is this death? Just one more dead revolutionary? One more inconvenient peasant caught in the wheels of power? Or the one whose death tore the curtain of the temple from the top? The one whose cross opens the way for all those walking the way of the cross to enter the Holy of Holies. Not by the blood of beasts, but by the blood of Jesus. Is this the one who can’t save himself? Or the one who is saving all who come to the foot of the cross?

This is the great division. And all of us like Simon of Cyrene are forced to walk past Golgotha. Which group are we part of when we see it?

**Reading 7: Burial – Mark 15:42-47**

We know that Easter is only a few days away. But my thought on this day are often that the Christian life – this way of the cross – is much more like this time of burial. We are still under the Pilates of the world. Which calls for courage. Joseph took courage, or as our translation today has it, took a risk.

Why would he do this? “He was waiting for the Kingdom of God to come.”

On the one hand the Kingdom of God is already in our midst. It is in our hearts. But on the other we are still bid to walk the way of the cross. We still place loved ones in the tomb. We still suffer loss and often the scorn of the powers that be. Like the Mary’s we know where the body is laid. We know the stone that is in front. And we wait for the Kingdom of God to come.

We don’t wait doing nothing. Risks are taken. Long linen cloths are purchased and put to use. We engage the powers the be. Waiting for the Kingdom isn’t without actions. Its discerning the right actions. It’s living now in the full belief that the stone can’t hold. That the body will not decay. That even in the tomb, we are triumphant. That nothing can stop the Kingdom of God. That the only question is if this Kingdom shall come to us also. That the way of the cross, contrary to all our material senses, if the way of life. In the midst of temporal death, we find our eternal life.