

March 25, 2018
Palm Sunday
“The Humbled King”

This sermon is based on *24 Hours That Changed the World* by Adam Hamilton. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009. See chapter 5.

I am only brushing the surface of this meaningful book. I heartily recommend it for anyone who seeks a better understanding of Jesus’ last day and all the significance it holds for Christians and the world.

Mark 15: 16-20, *Common English Bible*

The soldiers led Jesus away into the courtyard of the palace known as the governor’s headquarters, and they called together the whole company of soldiers. They dressed him up in a purple robe and twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on him. They saluted him, “Hey! King of the Jews!” Again and again, they struck his head with a stick. They spit on him and knelt before him to honor him. When they finished mocking him, they stripped him of the purple robe and put his own clothes back on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

It was a far cry from his Palm Sunday triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The people cheered, waved palm branches, and welcomed Jesus as their King. But in a few short days, all that would change. Last week, we left Jesus at the Antonia Fortress. The Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, had given the Jewish crowd the choice of releasing Jesus or Barabbas, a violent insurrectionist. The people, egged on by the Jewish authorities, and disappointed that Jesus wasn’t leading them to armed rebellion against the Romans, chose Barabbas. Pilate turned Jesus over to the Roman soldiers for flogging and crucifixion.

Jesus’ behavior was remarkable for being silent during all of this. He didn’t beg for his life, he didn’t object to his cruel treatment. Perhaps the soldiers were dissatisfied that he didn’t show a broken spirit. That may be why they then proceeded to mock and humiliate him.

They called together the whole cohort of soldiers, 300-600 of them, perhaps all that were stationed at Antonia Fortress. They then began to make a game of ridiculing Jesus. They stripped him so he would be naked and vulnerable. They held a fake coronation for this weak and bloody “king.” They covered him, probably only his shoulders, with a purple robe, the color of royalty. They made a phony crown for him out of thorn branches. They jeered, “Hey! King of the Jews!” Matthew reveals that they pressed a reed into his hand as a bogus scepter, a symbol of kingly authority (Matthew 27: 29). They formed a circle around him, spitting at him and hitting him in the face. They grabbed the reed and struck him with it. They mockingly bowed before him.

In this scene of shameful, cruel behavior, we get a picture of how humanity treated God, when he became flesh among us.

We might ask why the soldiers did this. Why did they bother to humiliate a helpless man? Jesus had never done anything to deserve their wrath. He had loved the least and the lost. He had healed people, and fed them. Why did they find it necessary to torment Jesus?

In all parts of this story, we confront the unbelievable actions of seemingly normal people. The Sanhedrin condemned Jesus against their own practices. The crowd that welcomed him on Palm Sunday now shouted for his crucifixion. Pilate knowingly sent an innocent man to death just to satisfy the crowd. And now the powerful Roman soldiers found fun in taunting and torturing a helpless man.

Were these people just evil to the core? Or did something happen to bring it out in them? Could there be times that ordinary folks lose their moral compass, act in fear and rage, and end up supporting policies and behaviors that they might not if they had cooler heads?

Philip Zimbardo is psychologist and professor emeritus at Stanford University. In 1971, he took up some research for the United States Navy, which wanted information about how people behave in prisons. He and some fellow researchers created a fake prison in the basement of the psychology building. They hired 24 Stanford students to pretend to be “prisoners” and “guards,” roles that were randomly assigned to the young men. The experiment was supposed to last 2 weeks, but had to be called off early, as the students assigned to be “guards” began to take their roles too seriously. The trouble began almost immediately. “Guards” began to exert authority through punishment. “Prisoners” rebelled. Arguments ensued. The “guards” used fire extinguishers to gain control, stripped “prisoners” naked, tore apart their beds, and put some “prisoners” in solitary confinement. After less than 48 hours, one “prisoner” became mentally unstable and had to leave. Overall, in just six days, the situation became dangerous and psychologically damaging, and had to be ended. The participants forgot that it was just an experiment, and began to act in ways that were unacceptable.

Zimbardo studied the results for the next thirty years. His summary was that any of us, given certain circumstances, could end up doing things we would never do otherwise.

His conclusions harked back to a frightening experiment done by Stanley Milgram at Yale University in 1963. Milgram asked people off the street, ordinary folk, to participate in a study. The purpose of the study was to see how far people would go before they rebelled against an authority figure, represented by a stern experimenter in a white jacket. The person off the street was to sit in front of some gauges, and give an unseen person electrical shocks at the direction of an experimenter. As the shocks grew higher in intensity, the unseen person began to scream in pain. Eventually the person grew completely silent. Actually, the gauges were fake and there was no unseen person—just recorded responses. No one actually received a shock. But, to the subjects, it was real. They truly believed they were torturing someone.

Prior to the experiment, the researchers thought that only 1% of folks would keep administering the shocks once they heard the screams. They were wrong. A full 65% kept sending the unseen person shocks. Many of them were visibly uncomfortable with it, and even asked to stop, but they still continued as long as the experimenter said to. It never occurred to a full 65% of people that they could simply refuse to continue.

Zimbardo drew some parallels between his experiment and Milgram's research, and he realized there were historical implications. Have you ever wondered what was wrong with Germans in the 1930's and 40's? Were they morally deficient? A whole nation lacking in compassion? No, Zimbardo points out that they were just like you and me, only living in a situation that altered their behavior.

So what does this suggest about the Roman soldiers? They were probably living in a situation where violence was common, and committing it was part of their role. There was probably peer pressure and pressure from authority figures to participate in it. So, they ended up doing unnecessary, inhumane things.

The crowds that day were probably under similar influence. The Jewish authorities wanted Jesus dead, and knew which buttons to push in the people to get that accomplished.

Here's the point, according to Hamilton:

Ordinary people can be persuaded to do extraordinary and awful things. Given the right combination of ideology, authority, and gradual desensitization, all of us can become monsters, capable of destroying others with weapons ranging from words to gas chambers. It is a reality we must face and guard against, looking instead to God and trying to understand who he has called us to be.

p. 86

Could even we do the same?

True confession. The small town in Iowa where I grew up was almost completely Caucasian at that time. There were a few African Americans, but very few. One summer day, I was playing in my yard with a group of neighbor kids. Some children, strangers and African Americans, rode their bicycles through the alley behind us. Somehow, the two groups got into a shouting match, each faction hurling racist and derogatory insults at the other. I was upset and confused, not understanding the situation or the insults, but I participated. What I did understand was that my friends, the people who I considered like me, were being threatened, and I had to go along with them to eliminate the threat, or so I thought. I was one of the 65% who didn't realize I had another choice.

I'm deeply ashamed of this now, but I was a child, and you could argue that I didn't really know what I was doing. I would of course never do this today...except haven't we all, to one degree or another, done exactly this? Haven't we all heard the racist joke, the sexist comment, the cruel

remark and decided to overlook it? To let it go for the sake of “peace”? Or is it really “peace” we seek? Aren’t we actually trying to avoid the uncomfortableness of confronting what is wrong? And when we do so, don’t we really make peace a little farther away?

If you have been in this situation, then you have been shaped by ideology, authority, desensitization and social construct to do something you know is wrong. We are no better than the Sanhedrin, Pilate, the Roman soldiers, the angry mob. God save us!

Fortunately for us, he does, by his grace. Not because we deserve it, but because God gives us forgiveness and salvation as a pure gift, through Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross.

How our salvation comes through the cross is called Atonement. Last week we talked about the idea of substitutionary Atonement—that Jesus died in our place, taking on himself our sin and punishment. Another idea about how Atonement happens is called the moral influence theory. This, according to Hamilton:

...maintains that the Atonement was not about changing God or making it possible for God to forgive us. It was, rather, about changing you and me. Jesus’ suffering, death and resurrection constitute a divine drama meant to communicate God’s Word to humanity, to make clear to us our need for redemption and forgiveness, to show us the full extent of God’s love and lead us to repentance. p. 89

What is God’s Word that we are supposed to hear in Jesus’ suffering and death? The first thing it should tell us is that humanity is broken. Everybody who was part of Jesus’ death is a part of that brokenness. Judas betrayed his friend. The disciples ran for their lives. Peter denied knowing Jesus. The Sanhedrin wanted to destroy him. Pilate cooperated with their demand. The crowds didn’t want a Messiah who preached love. The soldiers made a sport of torturing him.

What humanity did when God came to us in the flesh is a profound indictment.

We are meant to find ourselves in that story and to be moved by its tragic end. We are meant to realize that there is something deeply wrong with us, that we are broken and in need of forgiveness.

Hamilton, p. 90

When my son, Devin, was in 7th grade, I was a chaperone on a field trip for his class to the Holocaust Museum in Skokie. It was a moving experience for all of us, but kids will be kids—spirits were high on a day out of class. Until we got to a replica of a boxcar that transported Jewish captives to the concentration camps. The teachers herded all 20 kids into it, then pushed them back, crowding them against the wall and against each other. Then one of the teachers said, “This is how they would have ridden for hours, maybe days—no food, no water, no seats, no beds, no toilet, and no provision made for the elderly, the sick and the children.” The

students were completely silent, stunned as they experienced a very tiny, uncomfortable bit of what those helpless people went through. As I imagined our own precious children in that situation, I had to wipe a tear away. I wasn't the only one.

The heritage of the Holocaust is a witness to the violence and hate of the Nazi's. But it's also a witness to many ordinary people who refused to stand up to evil, including many people who called themselves Christian.

...(the) moral influence theory of the Atonement suggests that the suffering and death of Christ (is) meant to affect deeply those who hear the story. Jesus' suffering and death are intended to be a mirror held up to our souls, a reminder of the jealousy, pettiness, self-centeredness, spiritual blindness, and darkness that lurk in all our souls. We are meant to read the Gospel accounts of the torture, humiliation, and crucifixion of Christ and say, "Never again!"

Humanity's brokenness isn't the only thing we should learn from this story, though. We should also hear how deeply and profoundly God loves us, and how far he will go to save us from our sin, our bad choices, and our brokenness. Jesus dying on the cross is the image of the astounding love God has for us. And we are called to do our best to live in that love and so be worthy of that sacrifice.

But, as in all stories about God, the worst thing is never the last thing. Something terrible happened that Friday. Something we should learn from and never forget. Everybody said it was the end, but they were wrong. Hate and death and sin and brokenness will never have the last word. Sunday is coming!

References:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip_Zimbardo#Experiment