

Practically anyone who goes after an M.Div. degree at seminary is going to take a preaching class. It's part of the territory, just like a nursing major is going to take anatomy and physiology, and math majors are going to take calculus.

When you take a preaching class, you're introduced to different types of sermons and styles of preaching.

- Expository sermons, where you work through a book verse-by-verse. That might be in a series like we did with Ephesians several years ago.
- There are topical sermons, where you explore a topic throughout the breadth of the scripture. You remember how last year, we explored healthy sexuality through our "Body & Soul" series.
- There are narrative sermons, where the preacher can take on a character from the Bible and inject himself or herself into the text through creative storytelling.

And in seminary, you might learn about different ways to structure a sermon. Some have joked about "three points and a poem." You introduce the sermon, and have three carefully defined points, with two or more subpoints under each. And then you conclude with an emotional story or reading that captures the essence of the message. There are methods with catchy titles, like the Lowry Loop or what a friend describes as an "I-You-God-We" process.

One style that I've been introduced to is called the "Four Pages of a Sermon." They're not literal pages, it moves through a series that shows:

- Trouble in the text
- Trouble in our world today
- Grace in the text
- Grace in our world today

This can work well in narrative texts, texts that tell a story. So for example, when several of our JYFers worked together on a sermon last spring:

- Simon Hurst talked about the trouble in the text of the Good Samaritan. He told how the man who was walking from Jericho to Jerusalem experienced trouble, when he was beaten up by robbers along the way.
- And then Thomas Schlabach talked about the trouble in the world today. He described how people still feel beaten up in many ways, whether through bullying at school or by being beaten up by the difficulties of work and life.
- Then Zoë Brown talked about the grace in the text, how the Samaritan man showed compassion, just as Jesus showed compassion in many ways.
- And Evan Beck concluded by talking about the grace in the world today. He used examples such as the Amish response to the school shootings in Pennsylvania, and he challenged us to show compassion and grace to each other in the way we live.¹

¹ Sermon preached April 29, 2012

But when I thought about today's text, where Jesus comes to the cross, and he suffers, and he dies, I thought, "This ... is a one-page sermon."

It's hard to read this text and find any kind of trouble in our world today that is parallel to what Jesus experienced. There's persecution in our world, for sure, but most of us are very far from experiencing it ourselves.

And this passage ends with Jesus death. In the text, the resurrection is still two days away. In our calendar, Easter is still two weeks away. If we stay within the confines today's text, it's hard to find any grace jumping out at us.

And without those two elements to refer to—trouble in our world and grace in the text—it's hard to think to think of any grace in our world today.

But there's plenty ... of trouble ... in the text.

Jesus suffers a horrible death:

- He's tortured.
- He's humiliated
- He's deserted by nearly everyone.

You could even say that there are very few texts in the entire scripture, that are *more* full of trouble than the 22 verses that Fanchion and Ron and Fanny just read for us. If you need a visual image of what this experience was like for Jesus, check out Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. But if your stomach is easily turned, don't do it. I watched it recently, and I have never experienced such an unsettling, prolonged image of suffering. It's R-rated for a reason, and I'd encourage you to be very cautious with your own spirit and with those who join you if you choose to watch it.

And yet, it's *only* a portrayal. I say *only*, because we can turn off the movie and walk away. Jesus couldn't do that.

Over the last few weeks, we have walked the journey to the cross with Jesus:

- We've experienced the roller coaster with Jesus at the Last Supper.
- We've been with Jesus in Gethsemane.
- We've seen the sham of a trial and Peter's betrayal.
- And in last week's text, which comes immediately before today's text, Pilate hands Jesus over to be crucified.
 - And now Jesus heads to the cross.

The Roman crucifixion process was designed to be cruel. The scriptures don't provide many details, so most of what we know about crucifixion comes from archeological sources. In a Roman crucifixion, a condemned person had to carry his own *patibulum*, the 30- or 40-pound crosspiece of the cross. The images we see of Jesus carrying the entire cross are probably incorrect, since the upright piece may already be at the scene.

But Jesus is very weak from the beating he had received. So the soldiers press someone into service to help him. Simon the Cyrene is probably a Jew who has traveled from Africa to Jerusalem for the Passover. He likely stayed in town until Pentecost. Legend has it that he will be so moved by the crucifixion that he will be converted by Peter's speech and become one of the first believers.

The soldiers take Jesus, Simon, and the cross to Golgotha, the Greek word for skull, where many crucifixions happen. The name Calvary comes from the Latin word for skull. We don't know for sure where Golgotha was, but it most certainly was on a very public road. Roman crucifixions don't happen on dusty gravel roads in the backwoods. They happen in places like U.S. 33 between Goshen and Elkhart, in front of as much traffic as possible.

The soldiers sarcastically offer Jesus wine to drink, mixed with bitter gall. They cast lots to divide his clothing. Both of those are allusions to the Old Testament, including the Psalm that Ruthie read. Matthew's passion narrative has many Old Testament allusions, not surprising since he was writing for the Jews. Later, we'll read of Jesus cry of abandonment, and a half-dozen other connections to Psalm 22.

Over Jesus' head they put a sign that says "King of the Jews." Though it's ironically accurate to call him that, the sign wasn't there to compliment him. Instead, it's there as a warning to anyone else who might try to plot an uprising against the Romans.

He's crucified between two bandits. But these are not bandits in the sense of robbers or thieves. The Greek word refers to insurrectionists. These were political prisoners. Had Barabbas been chosen for the cross, he would have fit right in.

In verses 38-44, Jesus is insulted and verbally abused by three groups of people:

- There are the masses, who say, "If you are the Son of God, save yourself." One commentator suggests that this is essentially the fourth temptation of Jesus, reminiscent of the language back in chapter 4.
- He's insulted by the religious leaders, who would have had to make a special effort to follow the procession from the temple. They say the same thing — "Come down from the cross, and we will believe you."
- And finally, those who were being crucified with him taunt Jesus as well. Perhaps they're hoping that if Jesus will save himself, he will save them as well. Matthew doesn't record the confession of the one bandit—that comes in Luke's account.

In verse 45, Matthew records that darkness came over the whole land from noon until 3:00 in the afternoon. Some have suggested that there was a solar eclipse, but that can't be the case—the Passover happens at full moon. And Jesus cries out words that Matthew records in Aramaic and then translates into Greek for his readers. The Gospel writers record seven statements of Jesus from the cross, but these words from the Hebrew scripture are the only ones that Matthew records. Matthew has no "It is finished." Or "Into your hands I commit my spirit."

Local pastor and author Dan Schrock has written about what is called the "Dark Night of the Soul." That is a time when three things are present, all at the same time:

- There is a sense of "dryness" in one's spiritual life.
- There is a difficult time of praying in one's usual way, sometimes even an inability to pray.
- And there is a desire to be alone in loving awareness of God.
 - The person feels abandoned by God.²

² Dan Schrock, *The Dark Night: A Gift of God*, Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2009, p. 17.

Jesus, Dan suggests, was experiencing the darkest of nights of the soul. It didn't start that way for Jesus, of course:

- He was conceived as a miracle.
- From the time he was baptized in the Jordan as an adult, Jesus experienced an intimate relationship with God that gave him a sense of being "called, blessed, and sustained."³ When he came up out of the water, a voice spoke, saying "This is my Son, the beloved."
- And the Spirit was constantly in him. He opened his public ministry by saying "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me."
 - Only the Spirit could have allowed him to heal the sick.
 - And to cast out demons.
 - And do so many miracles in the name of God.

But just the night before, he had prayed to his father. "Daddy," he said in Gethsemane. "Take away all this suffering that I know is coming my way."

And God said nothing. God ... didn't ... do ... a thing. God didn't stop the unfolding series of events.

And now on the cross, Jesus no longer prays to Daddy. This time, it is "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

If we believe in a triune God, Dan says... if we believe in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer—at this point, we have to say that one part of God felt abandoned by the other two.⁴

That... is trouble ... in the text.

That... is a full page... of trouble.

As I said before, today's text is still two days from the resurrection. And we are still two weeks from Easter. Next week, we'll return to the beginning of Holy Week. The children will lead us through the aisles with palms waving. Perhaps you'll even join them in parading up and down the aisles, as we reconstruct the processional into Jerusalem.

But as you experience Holy Week, I invite you to return to the scriptures. Some of these texts are printed in your bulletins:

- On Monday, you might read his final teachings and parables.
- On Tuesday, you might read of Jesus praying in the garden.
- On Wednesday, you might read of Judas' betrayal.
- On Maundy Thursday, join us as relive Jesus's last supper with the disciples, where he stooped and washed the disciples' feet.
- On Friday, reread this passage of Jesus' suffering and death.
- And on Saturday, wait in silent expectation.

³ Schrock, 23.

⁴ Schrock, 26.

I began by talking about preaching. I've never been more moved by a sermon than I was four years ago, when our family spent Palm Sunday at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. That's the place where Martin Luther King Jr. pastored before he died.

In his sermon, Pastor Warnick reminded us of an ongoing chess match between God and Satan:

- When God moved and created the world, Pastor Warnick said, Satan counter-moved and brought sin into the world.
- When Satan moved and caused David to sin with Bathsheba, God counter-moved and Solomon was born.
- When Satan moved and caused Herod to kill all of the boy children in Israel, God counter-moved and provided an escape to Egypt.
- With increasing intensity and emotion Pastor Warnock counted perhaps 15 more moves and countermoves, including when Satan moved and had God's own son hung on a cross and crucified. In this cosmic chess match, Satan puts God in "check."

But God, Pastor Warnock reminded us, has one ... more ... move.⁵

Today's text is a *huge* page full of trouble. We also know that there is a *huge* page of grace that is soon going to be turned. As pastors, we are trained to turn that page to grace in our sermons. But I'm not going to do that this morning. I'm going to suggest that we can't fully experience the resurrection unless we fully experience the crucifixion.

But if we can't find a full page of grace in the text, perhaps we can at least find a couple paragraphs. Or maybe even just a couple of sentences—a couple of sentences that give us a hint of hope for the future.

Jesus felt abandoned by God. But if Jesus felt abandoned by God, we shouldn't suppose that the other two persons of the Trinity weren't also affected by the crucifixion.⁶ Perhaps the reason the sky turned black for three hours is that not even God could bear to see the pain. In the dark night of Jesus' soul, when even God can't bear to watch ..., perhaps that's a sentence of grace for us.

When the temple curtain—the place that housed the very presence of God—when the temple curtain was torn in two, allowing access to God to everyone ..., perhaps *that's* a sentence of grace.

When a Roman centurion and his guards, the very people who were trained to oversee the suffering and death of Jesus, can be the first observers to and proclaim, "Surely, this was the Son of God," ... perhaps that's a sentence of grace.

Dwell on this page, my friends. Read it. And read it again.

But remember, that the sentences are still being written. And the page is about to turn. Blessed be the name of the Lord.

⁵ Sermon by Rev. Raphael G. Warnock, Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, April 5, 2009.

⁶ Schrock, 26.