

But If You Think About It...

Luke 23:1-56

Palm Sunday, March 20, 2016

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

There are some things that are not surprising about the passion of our Lord. It is not surprising that the chief priests and the scribes accuse Jesus before Pilate and Herod. They hate Jesus. It is not surprising that the people also accuse Jesus and request His crucifixion. They are simply following the chief priests and the scribes.

It is not surprising that Pontius Pilate finds Jesus innocent. Jesus is innocent. Three times Pilate proclaims the innocence of Jesus. Thus far the finding of the Roman court. It is also not surprising that despite our Lord's innocence Pilate has him sentenced to crucifixion. I have pointed out before from this pulpit that Pilate was a political opportunist. He wanted a promotion from Caesar to some cushy position in Rome. Caesar had told Pilate that there had been too many riots in Jerusalem and Judea under his watch and that unless he kept the Jews under control he would not see his political ambitions come about. So it is no surprise that Pilate had Jesus sentenced to crucifixion. It would make the people happy. If it made the people happy, maybe Pilate could avoid another riot, keep peace in Judea, and receive his fat promotion. After all what is one Jew to Pilate? And seeing as how all of this is true it is not surprising when Pilate releases Barabbas to them even though Barabbas was guilty and guilty of murder no less.

It is not surprising that Herod was glad to see Jesus. Herod had already heard rumors about Jesus. Herod wanted to see Jesus perform some kind of sign. It is not surprising that Herod put a splendid robe on Jesus and mocked Him because Jesus did not perform a sign.

It is not surprising that the Romans made Simon of Cyrene carry the cross of Jesus. This was practice for prisoners who were unable to bear their own cross.

It is not surprising that women are following Jesus out to the place of the skull. These women had followed Jesus from the Galilee. They had supported His ministry out of their means. And my experience has been that women are generally more loyal to their causes and those they love than men are.

It is not surprising that the Roman soldiers mock Him by calling Him the king of the Jews. That would have enhanced their own feeling of power and covered up their feelings of inadequacy to make fun of a victim of crucifixion by calling Him the king of the Jews. It also would have served to put fear in those Jews who might also want to proclaim themselves to be a king. It is also not surprising that they cast lots for His clothing.

It is not surprising that the enemies of Jesus go out and continue to mock Him. It is not surprising that one of the malefactors who was crucified with Him also blasphemes Jesus. He mocks Jesus and says, "If you are the Christ, save yourself and us." The malefactor does not actually believe that Jesus can do any of it, but he believes that Jesus believes that He can, and so He mocks the notion that Jesus thinks He can save Himself by asking Him to do it and of course nothing happens.

It is not surprising that Jesus dies. Or is it?

The things about our Lord's Passion that are not surprising serve to highlight those things which are surprising.

It is surprising that our Lord makes no answer at His trial before Pilate. The one answer that He does give in Luke's account is enigmatic at best. Pilate asks Him if He is a king and our Lord answers, "You yourself say it." There is some debate as to what our Lord means by this remark. But whatever He means by it, it does not serve to save His life. And once our Lord is before Herod He makes no answer

whatsoever. You would expect an innocent man to prepare some kind of defense when He is put on trial. You would expect even a guilty man to put on some kind of defense in order to save His own life. But our Lord in spite of His innocence makes no defense of Himself. He does not even press His advantage with Pilate when Pilate finds Him innocent. In other words Jesus does not use Pilate's sentence of innocence to press Pilate into releasing Him and sparing His life.

Doesn't Jesus want His life spared? It seems like He wants to die. It is surprising that Jesus would want to die.

But if you think about it, He had predicted His death. This was apparently the Father's will that He should die. He had prayed in Gethsemane to be let out of the Father's will, but apparently that has not happened as Judas showed up with the soldiers to arrest Jesus.

If Jesus is going to atone for the sin of the whole world with His own blood, then He is going to have to die. If Jesus is going to take us sinners' place under the wrath of God in death and damnation in order to liberate us from that place, then He will have to die. If Jesus is going to save His people from the slavery to sin and death, then He is going to have to be the sacrificial lamb whose blood spares His people from death. In order to do any of this, He is going to have to die. The prophets had predicted that He would suffer and die. Our salvation is bound to His suffering and death. If he does not die, we are still in our sins. There is no atonement. If He dies, we are released from our sins. They are all forgiven. There is atonement and salvation.

In order to do this, He must die. He wants to do this and so He says nothing at His trials. It is actually in fact not surprising at all, if you think about it.

It is surprising that when our Lord is going out to the place where He will die, He takes the time to stop and make a short speech. He tells the women who were weeping after Him, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' And they will say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

Now I call this speech short because compared to some of our Lord's other speeches it is short. But considering that Roman soldiers are leading Jesus out to be crucified this speech is long. He actually took the time to say all of this? In the movie "King of Kings" the movie makers pared down what Jesus said to the women to merely, "Do not weep for Me." It made no sense to the movie makers to have Jesus say something long when a Roman soldier is pushing along to His death.

And yet here is this speech. Right on the way to His crucifixion our Lord gives a speech. It is a speech about Jerusalem. He addresses Himself to the daughters of Jerusalem and instead of thanking them for their support by turning out for His crucifixion to offer comfort and support Jesus tells them that they really ought to be weeping for themselves. It is not surprising that they are weeping for Him. It is surprising that He tells them that they really ought to be weeping for themselves. An astute woman may have had the nerve to say to Him, "Lord, do you not understand who is being crucified here?" But our Lord takes the time to make His pronouncement. He says that the reason that they should weep for themselves and for their children is because before they are dead the time will come when people will say, 'Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed.' They will say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.'"

Our Lord is pronouncing once again His judgment against Jerusalem. He had pronounced this judgment already. He is predicting that Jerusalem will be destroyed. It will be destroyed in such a horrific fashion and so many of the young men would die that people would consider barren women to be

blessed because at least they did not lose any children in the devastation. He will say that it will be so bad that people will wish for the mountains and hills to fall on them and either hide them or crush them because that would be better than facing what was about to happen to Jerusalem.

Then our Lord makes this comment about the dry and green tree. If they put Him to death when the tree is green, in other words if the Romans put Him to death when Jerusalem is standing, how many people more will be put to death when the tree is dry in other words when Jerusalem no longer has the power to stand against Rome.

In the midst of His crucifixion on the way to His death, Jesus takes the time to warn the daughters of Jerusalem of their coming fate because if they do not heed Him they will go down with Jerusalem in the slaughter that is coming.

Why is Jesus doing this?

Did you not pay attention to the angel Gabriel when He announced the conception of our Lord to Mary? He told Mary, "He will great and will be called the Son of the Most High. He will have the throne of His Father David and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever." One of the things that David did according to His vocation as the King of Israel was hold court for Israel and pronounce judgments. As David's heir Jesus is the King of Jerusalem and He is here pronouncing God's judgment upon the city in accord with God's will. He will pronounce further judgment in accord with God's will when the malefactor appeals to Him.

So even on the way to His cross our Lord pronounces His judgments and in fact it is precisely in His death that He pronounces His most wide ranging judgment, "Father forgive them." So if you think about it, the speech of Jesus is not surprising at all.

It is surprising that a malefactor would appeal to Jesus for help. The fact that the one malefactor blasphemes Jesus is not surprising highlights the surprise when the other malefactor tells him that they are getting what their deeds deserve, but Jesus has done nothing wrong. And then the biggest surprise of them all, the malefactor appeals to Jesus for His salvation, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

How much the malefactor knew was uncertain. Was he aware that Jesus would come into His Kingdom upon the completion of His death and resurrection? Was he thinking of our Lord's return in glory at the end of time when the kingdom would become manifest to the eyes of all people? Was he astute enough to think of both? Whatever was in his head one thing is for certain he is appealing to Jesus for his salvation. He does not offer Jesus any excuse for his behavior. He does not offer Jesus an explanation for his behavior. He does not try to justify himself in front of Jesus. If he had heard the Lord's judgment against Jerusalem and apparently had heard and believed that Jesus was the descendant of David, then what the malefactor is doing here is going before the throne of David and requesting judgment in this case He wants to be remembered.

The Lord who is the righteous judge makes His pronouncement, "Today, you will be with Me in paradise." He awarded the malefactor clemency despite the clear evidence and personal confession that in his own crucifixion the malefactor was getting what he deserved.

So, if you think about it, it is not surprising at all that the malefactor appeals to Jesus for salvation. What sinner wouldn't?

It is surprising that the sun grows dark in the middle of the day and then stays dark for three hours. If this is a solar eclipse as some speculate then something is really wrong with the moon. Luke does not record that clouds covered the sun. Luke records that the sun failed. It failed to shine. How this

was accomplished from a nuclear fusion perspective only God can say, but it is a surprise. The sun usually shines the hottest from noon until 3pm.

And then it resumes shining as if nothing had happened. This gives Joseph of Arimathea the necessary time to get the body down off of the cross and into the tomb before nightfall.

But then if Jesus is the righteous son of David sitting on David's throne and pronouncing judgments, and we have seen that he condemns Jerusalem, but exonerates the penitent malefactor, then if you have read the prophets you should have known that this would have happened. The prophets predict in several places that on the day that the Lord comes for judgment the sun will grow dark. When Jesus is crucified all of the sins of the world stand judged. The sun therefore grows dark and we should not have been surprised at all.

It is surprising that the curtain of the temple tears in two down the middle. Curtains do not simply up and tear themselves. Some have pointed out that the curtain in use in the temple at this time because of its sacred purpose is unusually thick. Do not think of your window treatments at home. Think rather of something more like a tarp although more beautiful.

This thing up and tears itself in two when Jesus dies. But then if you think about it, that is not surprising at all. If our Lord is indeed the sacrifice that takes away the sin of the whole world, not only does His death grant us access to God who was resident behind the curtain up until His crucifixion, it also renders the entire temple irrelevant. Oh Peter and John and the disciples will still go there to pray after the Lord's resurrection. Oh, Paul will occasionally offer a sacrifice to placate the Jews, but on the whole the disciples of our Lord after His resurrection ignore making sacrifices. The one great sacrifice has been made. Salvation has been accomplished. Atonement for the whole world has been made. If that is the case then the temple is unnecessary. There is no longer any reason to treat the Holy of Holies with the reverence it was due beforehand. Now God will no longer dwell behind a curtain. He will rather dwell in the body of Christ wherever the body of Christ is. So if you think about it, it is no surprise that the curtain tore itself in two.

It is surprising that Joseph of Arimathea requested the body of Jesus. The fact that he is waiting for the Kingdom of God is not exposed to his fellow Jews on the Jewish ruling council. Some of them were the ones who had Pilate put Jesus to death. They will now know that Joseph is a disciple of Jesus and will take punitive action against him. But Joseph does not care.

And if you think about it why would Joseph care? Let them throw me off of the council. Let them excommunicate me from the synagogue. Let them put me to death if they want. I have seen the Kingdom of God come in its power and I don't care who knows it anymore. I will honor my Lord as best as I can. I will at least offer a tomb for His burial. And by doing so Joseph becomes the owner of the location where the new creation begins.

And so if you think about it the surprising things about our Lord's passion and death are not all that surprising, if you think about it. Which means that three days hence you should not be surprised at what the women find when they go to look for His body.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.