

***The Passion Story***  
***Salem United Methodist Church***  
***Matthew 26:14-27:1-2;11-54***  
***April 13, 2014***  
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***The Passion Story***

We will remember the Passion Story of Jesus today in a Reader's Theater style of presentation. Scripture will be read followed by a meditation or a song. We have heard this story many times, but each time it can speak to us in a different way. As you hear the story read, I invite you to find yourself in the story. Who can you relate to Judas, Peter, the Chief Priest, Pilate, or the centurion at the foot of the cross? Allow the Holy Spirit to move within you as we listen together.

***Scene 1: Judas Agrees to Betray***

***Matthew 26: 14-16***

**Meditation**

And so our story begins with a betrayal. It foreshadows a tragic end. We know little about Judas. We know that he was the treasurer for the group of disciples of Jesus, but the Bible doesn't tell us why he would betray Jesus. Some believe that he was disillusioned by Jesus who he thought would raise an army and lead a revolution against Rome. Some believe that he was simply greedy and did it for selfish gain. While others believe he thought that if he could just get Jesus and the chief priests together in the same room, they would see just how special Jesus is. They might even discover that Jesus is the Messiah. While still others believed Judas knew Jesus had to die. Jesus had often talked about his impending death and he was just trying to lend a helping hand. Not knowing the reason adds to the mystique of the story. One thing is certain. Judas had a price. He sold out his teacher, his Rabbi whom he loved for thirty pieces of silver. This leads us to consider this. What is our price? What or how much does it take for us to sell out Jesus?

***Scene 2: The Passover with the Disciples***

***Matthew 26: 17-25***

**Meditation**

It was the Passover, a festive time, a high holy day for the Jews. People made pilgrimage to Jerusalem just to celebrate and remember the time God saved them as a people from slavery in Egypt. Today as well as back then, Passover is a time for family and friends to gather for a bountiful meal. During this time at the table special words are read. Special foods are placed on the table. Each has a special meaning that relates to the memory and gratefulness of God's passing over and saving the Israelites. And many glasses of wine were drunk. This is what Jesus and his closest friends were celebrating. (After a heavy meal and much wine, it is understandable how the disciples couldn't stay awake when Jesus asked them to pray with them at Gethsemane.) However, the atmosphere in the room was not festive, but filled with apprehension. The disciples noticed it. They knew that there was heightened tension between Jesus and the Temple priests. What would happen next? Would Jesus declare himself the Messiah to these leaders of their faith? And if he did how would they respond?

***Scene 3: The Institution of the Lord's Supper  
Meditation***

***Matthew 26: 26-29***

Jesus cut through their apprehension with one phrase: "One of you will betray me." All of them were probably thinking, "Surely, not I?" Yet, in the end they all did. They all abandoned Jesus. He might as well said, "All of you will betray me." With these words we need to look at ourselves. When have we betrayed Jesus? We all have. One person told the pastor after they hadn't been in church for weeks that they couldn't attend worship because they did something that they knew disappointed God. This person could be all of us. We all disappoint God. We all betray Jesus.

During the Passover meal, unleavened bread is eaten. During their rescue from the Egyptians, the Israelites could not wait for bread to rise, so unleavened bread is commemorated and eaten at every Passover meal. So it was during this last Passover with Jesus. At each Passover meal certain words and prayers are said at different times of the evening as the Exodus story is told and remembered. This is called the Haggadah. Jesus changed the words. He took the bread and blessed it. And as was his custom to use parables, analogies, similes, and metaphors, Jesus takes the bread and states that the bread is his body. A few hours later his body would be beaten and nailed to the cross. The disciples didn't understand Jesus' words and they ate the bread. Then Jesus took the cup. It might have been the third or fourth cup of the meal. Again he astonishes them with these words, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

The disciples would have been familiar with the term "blood of the covenant." Moses used these words when he took the blood of the sacrificed animals and sprinkled them on the people (Exodus 24:8). Or perhaps their thoughts went back to the prophet, Jeremiah, who spoke of a new covenant in which God would write the law on their hearts (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

One thing is for certain with these words, Jesus changed everything. He transformed the Passover Seder into what we call Holy Communion. The Israelites were the covenant people by the blood of animals; the Last Supper was the establishment of the new covenant by the blood of Jesus for all humanity. The Seder is the story of God's liberation of the Israelite slaves. Jesus transformed it into a story of God's liberation for all humankind from slavery to sin and death. With these words, God gave the entire human race, a new life and a new beginning. In this meal and through his death and resurrection, we are invited by Jesus to become God's covenant people.

We will take a few moments to meditate in silence. Think on how we have turned our backs on Jesus? How we have denied him by thought, word and deed...by what we have done, and what we have left undone?" Then we will sing the song, "Take Our Bread," page 640. I invite you to come forward while we sing to take a piece of this unleavened bread which our Middle School children baked for us and dip it into the cup. As you take these two elements, think about how this very act of Jesus is transforming your life.

**\*Song**

**"Take Our Bread"**

**#640 United Methodist Hymnal**

Receiving of the Bread and Cup

***Scene 4: Peter's Denial Foretold  
Meditation***

***Matthew 26: 30-35***

The scripture continues with these words, “And so said all the disciples.” Isn’t that what we hope for that when we need to stand up and be counted as a Christian, we will join in with Peter and all the disciples and say, “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.” I want to be a Peter. I want to say to Jesus, “I will not deny you even if I have to die.” One would think that a clergy person would never deny Jesus and yet I do. There are times I do not introduce myself as a pastor when I’m in a public situation. Isn’t that a form of denial? No one is threatening me. No one is saying that I will be tortured, or punished, or even killed if I say I’m a Christian pastor. And yet, I keep silent often when I am in public. I have found out in my sixteen years of being a pastor that people aren’t authentic around me once they find out that I am a clergyperson. Often they stop talking with me because I represent something that threatens them. Or they want to start an argument over faith issues. Or they apologize for their behavior like I am their judge. Please, I just want to be a normal person when I’m out in public. What is normal? Is it normal to be silent when someone may need to know who I am? Is it normal to run and hide like the disciples? Do any of us really have the courage to not deny Jesus in our families, at work, in our neighborhoods? None of us are normal when we decide to follow Jesus. It changes us to a new normal.

***Scene 5: Jesus Prays in Gethsemane***

***Matthew 26: 36-46***

**Song “Go to Dark Gethsemane”**

**(v. 1) #290 United Methodist Hymnal**

***Scene 6: The Betrayal and Arrest of Jesus***

***Matthew 26: 47-56***

**Song “What Wondrous Love Is This?”**

**(v. 1) #292 United Methodist Hymnal**

***Scene 7: Jesus before the High Priest***

***Matthew 26:57-68***

**Song “What Wondrous Love Is This?”**

**(v. 2) #292 United Methodist Hymnal**

***Scene 8: Peter’s Denial of Jesus***

***Matthew 26:69-75***

**Meditation**

Jesus was right! Peter denied him three times, yet Peter was the only disciple who had the courage to lag behind to see where they were taking Jesus. He was trying to be incognito, to spy on the events of the night. He was trying to be faithful to Jesus. He didn’t know what he could do, but he wanted to be near Jesus, to see and hear what was happening. He didn’t know what he could do, but he needed to be there. The unknown was even more frightening. Then it happened. He was discovered and feared for his life. And he denies Jesus not once, or twice, but the three time just like Jesus had said. Cock-a-doodle-do! The rooster would always be a reminder to Peter’s denial.

This incident is mentioned in all four gospels so it must have been important. We know that Peter became the leader of The Way after Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension. He became a great preacher. Did he tell this story of his denial and eventual redemption? The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus forgave Peter and commands him to care for his flock of people. Did Peter preach, “I know you’ve denied Jesus. I denied him myself. I denied him in a way that I am deeply ashamed of, and yet I have to tell you: I betrayed the Lord, but he gave me grace. He took me back. And if you’ve denied him, he will take you back too.” Peter could reassure people that when we deny Jesus, he will continue to take us back and use us to accomplish his work. We know from scripture and tradition that Peter never denied Jesus again.

In fact, years later Peter was crucified as well. Tradition has it that he asked to be crucified upside down.

**Scene 9: Jesus Brought before Pilate**  
**Song “Go to Dark Gethsemane”**

**Matthew 27:1-2; 11-14**  
**(v. 2) #290 United Methodist Hymnal**

**Scene 10: Barabbas or Jesus?**

**Matthew 27:15-26**

**Congregation’s First Response: “Barabbas.”**

**Congregation’s Second Response: “Let him be crucified!”**

**Congregation’s Third Response: “Let him be crucified!”**

**Song “To Mock Your Reign, O Dearest Lord” (v.1) #285 United Methodist Hymnal**

**Scene 11: The Soldiers Mock Jesus**

**Matthew 27:27-31**

**Song “To Mock Your Reign, O Dearest Lord” (v.2,3) #285 United Methodist Hymnal**

**Scene 12: The Crucifixion of Jesus**

**Matthew 27:32-44**

**Congregation: “You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.”**

**Scene 13: The Death of Jesus**  
**Final Meditation**

**Matthew 27:45-54**

It is finished. We can go home now back to the things of the world—clothes, cars, vacations, status. Or will we be like this soldier who having been part of the arrest, the trial, the beatings, the crucifixion, could proclaim that Jesus is God’s Son? Is this story a fable or a recorded event of history? Either way does it have the power to change us?

Much has been written on the theology of the cross, the power of the cross. There are various atonement theories. One is the substitutionary theory in which Jesus takes our place on the cross, receives the punishment for our sin. Another is the moral influence theory in which Jesus’ suffering and death demonstrate the depth of human sin and the breadth of God’s love in a way meant to move us to repentance and a deep desire to follow God. Then there is the sacrificial theory. The Jews of the Old Testament would bring sacrifices to the altar to atone for their sins. It was a way of saying to God, “I’m sorry for what I did. Please accept my offering as an expression of my remorse and repentance. Forgive me and make me clean.” With such an offering people would be restored into a right relationship with God. Once a year on the Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur, the High Priest would take the blood of a goat and enter the Holy of Holies to sprinkle the goat’s blood on the Ark of the Covenant where they believed God resided. This act was a way to express the people’s repentance and their desire to be reconciled to God. In the Crucifixion, Jesus acts as the High Priest representing all of us. He offers himself as a sacrifice to God to atone for our sins, to reconcile us with God. Jesus as being fully human and fully divine died our human death so we can receive forgiveness and grace. Jesus’ suffering and death represent Jesus’ self-giving, his offering on our behalf so we could gain God’s mercy. God could never ignore the offering of the Son on our behalf.

Another view of the cross is Redemptive Suffering that is the power of the cross lies in teaching us that our suffering can bring us closer to God and bring us into a deeper faith. God

can take this worst thing-God in human form dying on the cross and make it into the best thing-the redemption of the world. We learn that our suffering is not about us. God doesn't create tragedy, pain, betrayal, or death, but can use these to bring us closer to God. As we suffer in this life, the cross can transform our suffering so that we will care for others more than we care for ourselves. As Paul stated in Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

Each of us may feel more comfortable with one of these theologies of the cross. Perhaps all of them make sense to you. Or perhaps you are discovering one of them for the first time today. No matter, know this. God loved the world so much that God gave his only Son, so whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.

As we sing the final song of the day, allow the words written by Isaac Watts four hundred years ago to penetrate our very souls today.

*\*Song*                      *"When I Survey the Wondrous Cross"*                      *#298 United Methodist Hymnal*  
All leave in silence