

## **Fifth Sunday in Lent – April 7**

The passion of our Lord is looming large on the horizon of the Church, and our Lenten catechetical enterprise must soon come to an end. Next week, Palm Sunday, we observe the solemn Passion of our Lord. On the following Sunday we celebrate the Resurrection. Then will the catechesis come to its fruition. We will once more step into that eternal stream, of which our baptism was but a part. We will dine with our Lord in that upper room, stand in shocked awe and horror at the foot of a cross, weep at a tomb, and marvel at Son-rise.

Today, as we draw nearer to Holy Week, we encounter the extreme, even banal injustice of those who oppose Jesus. As Samuel Crossman (isn't that a wonderful name!) said in the hymn *My Song is Love Unknown* "Why, what has my Lord done? He made blind to see, the lame to run..." Today we encounter the plot to arrest and kill Jesus for the crime of truth telling and upsetting the status quo of folks who had too much invested in it.

The streams of topics we have dealt with for the past several weeks are coming together, converging on the cross. The mystery of a salvation which is worked out through weakness and losing, the theology of the cross, will intersect with the love which God has for Jerusalem and the rebellious people of this whole planet. The victory which Jesus won over Satan in wilderness will be reprised in the strange scene of Calvary, but this time Satan thinks he has vanquished, only to be utterly defeated. Jesus will oddly embrace the whole sinful world, as the father embraced the prodigal. He will in our Gospel reading reach out his hands and arms once more toward his persecutors. You can read this Gospel lesson as Jesus once more, with frustrated and tender love warning his enemies of what is about to overtake them.

They don't listen, instead they kill him for it. Oddly, Jesus knows they will, but he says it anyway, provoking them with these words to do the very thing he warns them about.

But that is not the end of the story. Among those Pharisees who listened to Jesus that spring day in Jerusalem and who then turned to plot against him, there was one young man, a zealous fellow. We have no idea if he participated in this plot, probably not. He was young, and this seems to have been a powerbroker's vendetta against Jesus. His name was Saul. Jesus would once more confront this member of the Pharisees, about three to five years later, on a road to Damascus. Today we hear that same man, now an old man, reflecting on those days as a Pharisee, before he met Jesus. He was part of this crowd Jesus loved and never stopped loving. His story of transformation which he relates here today is a powerful testament to the love of God. Even bitter enemies become friends in Christ.

Isaiah will couch this in radical terms for us. God urges us to forget that past, he is wiping the slate clean, he does something radically new. Even the jackals will sing his praises after this, the wild beasts, and wild, beastly men like zealous Saul of Tarsus.

## **Collect of the Day**

Almighty God, by Your great goodness mercifully look upon Your people that we may be governed and preserved evermore in body and soul; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*I like this prayer today. It seems to say that we really haven't got a clue what we are asking for or what to ask for, so we will couch this in terms most general. We want God to look upon us in his goodness, mercifully and just take care of it for us. I haven't got a clue what is best, I don't know what I need or want. I can only count on His goodness and his mercy.*

*But I wonder sometimes if we don't import some meaning. I want that divine goodness to govern us, mercifully. Governance is a really interesting word here. I have a governor, her name happens to be Kate Brown, and she "governs" the state from Salem, Oregon where the capitol is located. I have never met the woman, and she really has no reason ever to talk to me. Yet, she governs me. Just what does that word mean? She administers laws, I will certainly speak with one of her representatives if I break the law and am arrested. But if I am a law abider, she really won't pay much attention to me unless she thinks I can deliver a block of votes at election time.*

*Governed by God must surely involve something different, but what? Do we think of God as a sort of benignly neglectful sort who really doesn't pay much attention until I am screaming out in pain or for something I need? That is actually a form of deism and not Christianity. What does God's governance entail for me? Is this about him watching over every moment of every day? Then why does the crud happen in my life with the same regularity as it does in the lives of everyone else?*

*Is it like this? The governance of God shows up in our lives in little and large things, and often is best attested through the very act of testimonial. We perhaps best explain the governance of God by pointing to the moments in our life when we might see the hand of God at work in our life. Perhaps we see it in the little problem that suddenly resolves and we say "Thank you, God!" Perhaps we see it in the moments of dramatic rescue. I remember once watching a bevy of cars careening across the icy freeway in my rear view mirror. I had unwittingly driven over an icy place on the freeway at considerable speed. As I watched in horror as the scene unfolded behind me I could only thank God for guardian angels. I was too terrified even to touch the brake pedal lest I join them in their very expensive and dangerous game of bumper cars. I slowly coasted to a more reasonable speed and gingerly made my way home.*

*And then we want to be preserved in body and soul. That is another word with an interesting set of possible meanings, some of which are really creepy. I have preserves in my house, we put them up last summer when the berries were ripe and we had the time. Am I preserved like a batch of jam? Saved like all the stuff that is in my basement, waiting for the day when I remember it exists and finally will get around to using it?*

*How am I "preserved" in body? Is it like king Tut's mummy? I hope not. Of course the word has many more meanings than this, and in its Latin roots, it speaks of a much more significant sense*

*of rescue or help. This is why we still refer to a 'life preserver' when we talk about those bulky things we wear while paddling our canoe around the lake. Even that, however, is not helpful. Is Jesus like a life preserver, something I hope I never have to use, which gets in the way when I want to paddle around the lake, and is darn uncomfortable sometimes? I really wonder what we mean when we speak these words and I wonder what our people hear? How would we preach these texts to give them meanings which actually might communicate something healthy to our people?*

*The governance and preservation for which we pray is tied to the mercy of God. We can easily see that God's preserving me is an act of mercy, but governing me as an act of merciful goodness? Does this force us to rethink what governance truly is? Could this be an access point for a preacher in this political climate? Is the opposite of governance helpful here? Is the prospect of anarchy able to hold traction for us? Perhaps the videos we see of anarchic places around the world, or a riot, or something else might help us visualize that. The ancient Romans thought that to be civilized was to live in the ordered world of a city/town. To be in the countryside was to be uncivilized. Even the word civilization is derived from that truth. The Roman word for city/town is "civis." For them this ordering of society was a positive good. Do we think about that differently today? Do we chaff under the governance of the nanny-state? How do we hear that word?*

## **Readings**

*Isaiah 43:16-21 I have provided the entire chapter for us. Isaiah is called the Gospel of the OT for a very good reason. This chapter, in beautiful poetic imagery, speaks of God and his great deed. I encourage you simply to read it slowly. Ponder each word. Begin by letting the text work on you instead of working on the text.)*

*But now thus says the LORD,  
he who created you, O Jacob,*

*he who formed you, O Israel:*

*"Fear not, for I have redeemed you;*

*I have called you by name, you are mine.*

*<sup>2</sup> When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you.*

*<sup>3</sup> For I am the LORD your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.*

*I give Egypt as your ransom,*

*Cush and Seba in exchange for you.*

*<sup>4</sup> Because you are precious in my eyes,*

*and honored, and I love you,  
I give men in return for you,  
peoples in exchange for your life.  
5 Fear not, for I am with you;  
I will bring your offspring from the east,  
and from the west I will gather you.  
6 I will say to the north, Give up,  
and to the south, Do not withhold;  
bring my sons from afar  
and my daughters from the end of the earth,  
7 everyone who is called by my name,  
whom I created for my glory,  
whom I formed and made.”  
8 Bring out the people who are blind, yet have eyes,  
who are deaf, yet have ears!  
9 All the nations gather together,  
and the peoples assemble.  
Who among them can declare this,  
and show us the former things?  
Let them bring their witnesses to prove them right,  
and let them hear and say, It is true.  
10 “You are my witnesses,” declares the LORD,  
“and my servant whom I have chosen,  
that you may know and believe me  
and understand that I am he.  
Before me no god was formed,  
nor shall there be any after me.  
11 I, I am the LORD,  
and besides me there is no savior.  
12 I declared and saved and proclaimed,  
when there was no strange god among you;  
and you are my witnesses,” declares the LORD, “and I am God.  
13 Also henceforth I am he;  
there is none who can deliver from my hand;  
I work, and who can turn it back?”  
14 Thus says the LORD,  
your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel:  
“For your sake I send to Babylon  
and bring them all down as fugitives,*

*even the Chaldeans, in the ships in which they rejoice.*

<sup>15</sup> *I am the LORD, your Holy One,  
the Creator of Israel, your King.”*

<sup>16</sup> Thus says the LORD,  
who makes a way in the sea,  
a path in the mighty waters,  
<sup>17</sup> who brings forth chariot and horse,  
army and warrior;  
they lie down, they cannot rise,  
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:

<sup>18</sup> “Remember not the former things,  
nor consider the things of old.

<sup>19</sup> Behold, I am doing a new thing;  
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

I will make a way in the wilderness  
and rivers in the desert.

<sup>20</sup> The wild beasts will honor me,  
the jackals and the ostriches,

for I give water in the wilderness,  
rivers in the desert,

to give drink to my chosen people,

<sup>21</sup> the people whom I formed for myself  
that they might declare my praise.

<sup>22</sup> “*Yet you did not call upon me, O Jacob;  
but you have been weary of me, O Israel!*

<sup>23</sup> *You have not brought me your sheep for burnt offerings,  
or honored me with your sacrifices.*

*I have not burdened you with offerings,  
or wearied you with frankincense.*

<sup>24</sup> *You have not bought me sweet cane with money,  
or satisfied me with the fat of your sacrifices.*

*But you have burdened me with your sins;  
you have wearied me with your iniquities.*

<sup>25</sup> “*I, I am he  
who blots out your transgressions for my own sake,  
and I will not remember your sins.*

<sup>26</sup> *Put me in remembrance; let us argue together;  
set forth your case, that you may be proved right.*

<sup>27</sup> *Your first father sinned,  
and your mediators transgressed against me.*

<sup>28</sup> *Therefore I will profane the princes of the sanctuary,  
and deliver Jacob to utter destruction  
and Israel to reviling.*

*My comments refer to the text which we will read on Sunday, not the whole chapter.*

*“Until I am nothing, God makes nothing of me.” Bonaventura*

*If we think we have God figured out, think again. He has a number of surprises up his sleeve. Notice that the first two verses which speak about the exodus event, which was centuries in the past from Isaiah’s point of view are referred to in the present. Bonaventura, whose quote I include above is also famous for saying that God is absolutely outside our perception of time. He compared us to a line of ants walking across the floor. God can move back and forth along the line, but we cannot. We are caught in a stream, a train of time, and must follow the moment which was before. But this then leads us to wonder if God is perpetually living in every moment? What does that suggest about the cross itself? Is it simply true that because God intersected with that moment in history when Jesus hung on the cross; that he never really leaves it? Is the Cross always part of God’s reality? Does that empower us and our forgiveness today?*

*This text at first seems a little like it is of two minds. First it reminds us of what God has done. Isaiah has us harken back to the central event of Israelite history, the Exodus, as Moses and the Children of Israel escape slavery in Egypt by fleeing through the waters of the Red Sea, miraculously parted. It is this God who is saying this, the one who parted that Red Sea. He brought chariot and horse, army and warrior to their end, they lie down, and they do not rise. This is actually a direct quotation from the liturgical song that Moses sang at that point and which is part of the devout observance of the Easter Vigil for Christians and the Passover for Jews.*

*Then he tells us to forget all about that. Is this apophasis, a rhetorical technique in which the speaker tells us to ignore something he really wants us to pay attention to. Politicians do this regularly. “I am not going to mention my opponent’s legal troubles.” In fact, he just did mention it in his denial, but it sounds like he is taking the high road. Does Isaiah tell us to forget the very thing he wants us to remember? Is this a little like the too competitive golfing partner who tells you, as you tee up, “Don’t hit your ball into that water hazard over there!” He knows full well that by drawing your attention to it, you will hit it right there.*

*God is doing something new, something so big that it will make us forget that old stuff. Even now, says Isaiah, God is doing it, it springs forth and he wonders why we cannot see it.*

*What is the new thing? God is making a way in the wilderness, a river in the desert. He is creating life where only arid death reigns. The creatures which inhabit that desolate land, they will praise God for this. The jackals and the ostriches, will honor God for water in the*

wilderness. The Israelites in exile were in what is today Iraq. If you look at the map you can see some of the issue here. Between Iraq and modern day Israel is a vast desert. One can cross it with a car today, if you survive the IED's, but in the ancient world large numbers of people had to traverse the fertile crescent, up along the rivers and then down along the sea. Isaiah imagines them taking the much shorter way across the desert, but it is possible because God is reversing the exodus. Instead of dry land in the sea, there is a river in the desert.

We wondered if the desert was a metaphor for any place that did not know God. Is this the gentiles? One could develop that idea. Isaiah surely does develop the idea that this good news is not just for Israel (check out chapter 49 where the servant is charged to bring the light of God to all the ends of the earth).

The water has purpose, that the people God has formed for Himself, His chosen people might drink it, live, and declare His praise. In the collect we wondered what sort of preservation we were praying for. God has not preserved his people so that they can sit on a shelf in the basement. He preserved them to a purpose. They are to declare his praise. To whom? Surely to the rest of the world. Is this really the essence of evangelism? It is not about convincing someone but it is really about telling them what God has done for you.

What is Isaiah doing here? These verses fit in the first section of the second part of Isaiah, in which he addresses the discouraged, exiled people of God. They are wondering if God is a loser, if God has abandoned them, if they have so ruined the covenant that they have been utterly rejected by God. Isaiah offers them words of hope. God has not rejected them, he is disciplining them, yes, but he has not rejected them. The people who are weak and without hope will be given hope, the downtrodden will be restored, the same God who led them out of bondage in Egypt will also lead them home again. He is strong to save.

But it is really interesting how he does this in this passage. He will cause wild animals to sing his praise. Is he saying something here about the scope of the work he must do with the people? Is the change which he must work in their hearts comparable to the change which would be required to have a choir of ostriches and jackals? Can you picture such a thing? Wait a moment, perhaps I can see such a thing. Do we not stick our heads in the sand and often spend our days barking and biting like jackals? Ouch, this might be hitting closer to home than we might know.

What does the average parishioner need to hear from this text? In what sort of events and times do we encounter our moments of despair and hopelessness like Isaiah's people were feeling? When do we appear as people who look at ourselves and wonder if God can make anything of us?

Isaiah asks if we can see it. When do we find our eyes blinded to the work of God? Where is he causing something to grow and blossom in our midst and we are missing it? Where is he causing something green to grow and flourish and we don't recognize it because it is out in what we think is a desert waste land, outside the walls of our church?

*This text has really excellent implications for the person who feels that they are cut off from God, that he surely could not love me. The cross is always a present moment for God. He can include jackals and ostriches in his choir, he has room for me. He does all this so that he can call forth the praise of the people he loves, the folks he formed, he made, just for that purpose.*

*There are a number of preaching opportunities here. Is this one? This is the new thing that Lord is doing, the thing which dwarfs the old thing God once did with Moses. The Lord is interested in me, he has forgiven my sins. Only my pride stands between me and this blessing. Will I be like the Israelites who have had such a God and grown weary of him?*

*We also liked the baptismal imagery in here. The water and the wilderness offered some excellent opportunities. Earlier the chapter it emphasizes the name – God has created us and give us a name. The wilderness is no longer our foe – God has even given the Jackals and the Ostriches I fear to be my fellow worshiping creatures.*

*“Forget the past...” are we too hung up on the past? Do we need a fresh start? Is it time to move on as a nation, as a church, or as a congregation? God doesn’t always do things the same way. What if he doesn’t operate the church exactly the same way as it was when I was a child?*

#### Psalm 126

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,  
we were like those who dream.

<sup>2</sup> Then our mouth was filled with laughter,  
and our tongue with shouts of joy;  
then they said among the nations,  
“The LORD has done great things for them.”

<sup>3</sup> The LORD has done great things for us;  
we are glad.

<sup>4</sup> Restore our fortunes, O LORD,  
like streams in the Negeb!

<sup>5</sup> Those who sow in tears  
shall reap with shouts of joy!

<sup>6</sup> He who goes out weeping,  
bearing the seed for sowing,  
shall come home with shouts of joy,  
bringing his sheaves with him.

*We often lose sight of the fact that the exile was a tremendous psychological scar on the people of Israel. This little psalm speaks of the joy of the return. You might also read Psalm 137 to see just what they thought of this before that return.*

*Why would they sow in tears? Is this perhaps the penitent exile who finally realizes that it is his own sin which has brought them to this point? Is the one who comes home with the harvest of joy the person who has been redeemed?*

*Is this the joy of the forgiven sinner? Is this the joy of the person who has been released from bondage to sins and death and pain? Who sings this song today? Do we?*

Philippians 3:(4b-7) 8-14

*Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.*

<sup>2</sup> Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. <sup>3</sup> For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh— <sup>4</sup> though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup> circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup> as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. <sup>7</sup> But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. <sup>8</sup> Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— <sup>10</sup> that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup> that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

<sup>12</sup> Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. <sup>13</sup> Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, <sup>14</sup> I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. <sup>15</sup> Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. <sup>16</sup> Only let us hold true to what we have attained.

*Paul speaks of himself here. What descriptor/adjective would one take away from this portion of this letter? Changed man, flexible? He was headed one way but now is going the other. Is he describing a man who can change his most basic principles? Is that a good thing? In his own time, it may be that some people thought he was flighty. We might value someone who can admit a mistake and go the other way, but we also value someone who has stuck to his principles. What does this say about Paul to us? We tend to read Paul's words through an extremely charitable or favorable lens. How do you think Paul's change of course was received in the first century? Surely his fellow Pharisees were not terribly happy about it. It appears that some Christians were suspicious and others may have thought he went too far (read Galatians).*

*As Paul strains ahead (vs 13) he is forgetting what lies behind. The rubbish that Paul has rejected in vs 8 is not only the score keeping which noticed the good he has done, but also the negative checks on his record. There are two kinds of score keeping we like to do. One kind says that we have earned something from God, as if he reacts to my goodness. The other sort of score keeping is that I am so bad that God cannot love me, as if he reacts to my badness. Paul is saying that all this is rubbish, he has left it behind. God has given him a new start every day. He can strain instead for the goal that God has laid out for him. The past is past and it is in Christ's capable hands. What matters is that he knows Christ.*

*Paul's desire here would be considered psychopathic by many. He wants to be like Jesus in his death, in other words that is the perfection he strives for. He wanted to know Jesus, but not just the Jesus of glory, but also the Jesus suffering, dying, rising from the grave. He wants to be like him in his death. Are we ready to say that?*

*A few years ago I was blessed to teach a class on the prison letters of Paul. As a result, my appreciation of this little book grew immensely. I had taught Philippians in bible studies before, but I found that this was a little more intense and really more interesting than I had initially thought.*

*Paul of course writes this from prison, but he counter-intuitively writes about joy and exhorts the Philippians and us to a joy which is modeled on his joy which is modeled on the Jesus whose story is summed up in the hymn found in 2:5-11. In describing and proclaiming this joy, Paul is advocating a radical displacement of the self from the center of my world, and a re-orientation of self into an orbit around Christ. What is equally important is that Paul does not think that he has done this. Jesus has displaced Paul from that first place in his life. Of course it helps to have an encounter with Jesus that literally knocks you off your horse and leaves you blind. But he is asserting that in the incarnation and the obedient self-sacrifice of Christ on that cross, He has displaced us from that position of most important.*

*For the Romans of the first century this was a frontal assault on their culture which enshrined boasting or self-promotion as a virtue. It was a little like having a resume.*

*In this section Paul is getting testy. He starts off this section by suggesting that those who think otherwise than he does about this humility are "dogs." Considering the OT lesson with its emphasis on jackals praising God, I rather wish that the pericope had included that and you may want to extend this text to those verses. What makes that interesting is that Paul seems to say in these verses that he used to be one of those "dogs."*

*Paul used to be one of those guys who was the self-promoting type. He had a claim on no less than God himself. He had kept the rules and God, at least in his old way of thinking, should have noticed that.*

*Now, of course, he thinks such things are rubbish, worthy only to be left in the big can which we leave by the curb on Wednesday mornings on my street. Burly men in the large truck come by*

*early in the morning, crush that stuff into a tidy little blob and dump it in a land fill somewhere. That is all such thinking is good for, the dump.*

*Paul's life has been totally restructured, completely reoriented. Christ is his rising sun and North Star. He wants nothing else than to know Him.*

*It is for Jesus' sake that Paul has suffered, and will eventually die. Here we get a troubling phrase, troubling because our English rather betrays us. The RSV used to say "so that I may somehow attain to the resurrection of the dead." This is even worse in some respects. It seems to suggest that Paul's resurrection is the result of him getting his suffering right. I think that in an effort to remain faithful to the actual Greek words both translations have actually done a disservice to understanding. It sounds, when you read this, like Paul is not sure that he will be raised, as if the resurrection were in some way less than a sure thing. Or one can read it as if he is responsible for whether it happens or not.*

*That is not really the way the Greek reads here. Paul is sure the resurrection will happen, he is not entirely certain exactly how Jesus will pull that off. There is an indefinite word in there, and it is "somehow" but it doesn't really refer to the resurrection itself, but to the mode or manner of that resurrection. The "how it happens" he is leaving in Jesus hands, but the fact of the resurrection he has a promise from him. So, even though he is facing death, and he knows it, he is certain that somehow Jesus will raise him from the dead. That resurrection thing is a mystery and Paul is not about to explain it. Somehow, Christ will get that done. You have to remember that Paul often speaks as though he thinks Jesus will come back any day. He seems to fully expect that he would live to see the last day.*

*In the next verses, Paul even admits that he has a long way to go. The good work which Christ began in him is not yet complete. Remember this is a work of God, not of Paul. But as far as God has taken him, as far as he has achieved, that he will strive to hang on to and he exhorts the rest to think the same way.*

*But then, in the omitted verses, Paul speaks with a remarkable humility. The mature can think this way, but if you don't that is not really a problem for Paul. God will show you the way. He is totally confident of this. Just, hang onto what you have from God. It is a life raft, a life preserver in the storm of this life. Hang onto that promise of your baptism and Christ's gift to you. Don't slide back into that economy of buy and sell from which God had rescued Paul and has rescued us. Don't assert your ego-centric universe from which God rescued you. Is this last a particularly important message for our synod as we come to convention this summer? We have a strong impulse to make everyone agree and to make everything the same. Paul seems to have had room in his relationship with the Philippians for disagreement about central ideas. Paul is not talking about inconsequential things here. His desire to be one with Christ seems like it is pretty central to the whole enterprise, and yet he can admit that others think differently and he is OK with that. Were Timothy and Titus ordained when he sent them to deliver, read, and interpret letters to the Corinthian congregation? Did they need to be? What about Phoebe and*

*her mission to bring the letter to the Romans? Was Paul working in emergency situations? Was he working out of a new principle which made such actions valid? Is there room to disagree on these questions in the LCMS, or do we have to agree on this?*

*Paul speaks of striving. Does he suggest here that the gospel motivates him even more than the law ever did in his old life? Is the comparison in the striving? Paul calls his old life rubbish, and then goes on to speak of his effort. Is he asserting that the Gospel has actually moved him to do more?*

*Luke 20:9-20 Again, I have included some context here. Jesus speaks of the crimes of the vineyard tenants, but what the reading leaves unclear is that Jesus speaks these words as they are doing the very dirty deed Jesus describes. They are looking for a reason to kill the owner's son.*

*One day, as Jesus was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes with the elders came up <sup>2</sup> and said to him, "Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority." <sup>3</sup> He answered them, "I also will ask you a question. Now tell me, <sup>4</sup> was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?" <sup>5</sup> And they discussed it with one another, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why did you not believe him?'" <sup>6</sup> But if we say, 'From man,' all the people will stone us to death, for they are convinced that John was a prophet." <sup>7</sup> So they answered that they did not know where it came from. <sup>8</sup> And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."*

<sup>9</sup> And he began to tell the people this parable: "A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants and went into another country for a long while. <sup>10</sup> When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, so that they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. <sup>11</sup> And he sent another servant. But they also beat and treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed. <sup>12</sup> And he sent yet a third. This one also they wounded and cast out. <sup>13</sup> Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.' <sup>14</sup> But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours.' <sup>15</sup> And they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? <sup>16</sup> He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others." When they heard this, they said, "Surely not!" <sup>17</sup> But he looked directly at them and said, "What then is this that is written:

*"The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone"?*

<sup>18</sup> Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him."

<sup>19</sup> The scribes and the chief priests sought to lay hands on him at that very hour, for they perceived that he had told this parable against them, but they feared the people. <sup>20</sup> So they watched him and sent spies, who pretended to be sincere, that they might catch him in something he said, so as to deliver him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor. <sup>21</sup> So they asked him, “Teacher, we know that you speak and teach rightly, and show no partiality, but truly teach the way of God. <sup>22</sup> Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar, or not?” <sup>23</sup> But he perceived their craftiness, and said to them, <sup>24</sup> “Show me a denarius. Whose likeness and inscription does it have?” They said, “Caesar’s.” <sup>25</sup> He said to them, “Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” <sup>26</sup> And they were not able in the presence of the people to catch him in what he said, but marveling at his answer they became silent.

*What should this parable say to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?*

- 1. Are the preachers and leaders of Churches the tenants? Is this spoken to us? Have we failed to work God’s vineyard properly? Have we failed to prune the vines, keep the weeds down, water in times of drought? Have we failed to harvest the fruit? But does this put too much on us? Is it not Jesus who causes the fruit to be borne?*
- 2. Do we dare just read this historically – as a way to understand how it is that Jesus came to the cross?*
- 3. Are we the new tenants to whom the vineyard has been given? Are we now being asked to deliver the fruit? What is the fruit?*
- 4. Do we do well to think of it all of these ways at the same time? Do we sometimes seek to seize the kingdom from God, owning the church for our own purposes, controlling the Word and Spirit of God and not letting it have free course among us? And yet, do we also need to remember that Jesus has taken the vineyard from some and given it to others, and are we the beneficiaries of that? Do we need to remember that the fruit is not ours, but it is God’s fruit which he causes to bud and grow and produce?*

*Luke tells us this story in the context of Holy Week. Jesus has ridden in on Palm Sunday, the crowds have adored him, the temple has been cleansed and the tensions are running sky high. Pilate is in town with every single legionary he can get his hands on so he can ride herd on the boiling cauldron that is Jerusalem at Passover. The city has swelled to five times its usual size, from about 50,000 year round inhabitants to a quarter million or more pilgrims thronging through the temple courts, jamming up the traffic, overwhelming the public services. (Can you just imagine the smell?)*

*The scribes and Chief Priests who are the targets today are feeling a great deal of pressure from the many that Jesus offended when he cleansed the temple of merchants and money changers. Paul Maier estimated that 20% of the city’s permanent population derived its income from the temple, and Jesus did not make any friends that day.*

*Jesus speaks hard words to them today, but Jesus also speaks truth. You get the sense that Jesus would really like them to listen, he wants them to repent, to change their ways. But they will not. He knows that, he knows that these words will be one of the triggers of this week which will result in him being crucified. Yet, he stands there, in the image of last week's parable, with arms outstretched to elder brothers still.*

*He chooses his words very carefully. This parable is not original to this moment, but is in fact a treasured image which God used through the prophet Isaiah in which he described the nation of Israel as his vineyard, lovingly tended and established. Jesus puts a new twist on this parable, especially with his question at the end. In Isaiah's telling the vineyard only yielded sour grapes and God vowed to tear it up, tear down the wall, and destroy the vineyard. Then, later in the book, Isaiah tells them that God will replant them in their land. The Jews of Jesus' day thought that God had replanted them, that they were producing the sweet fruits, the Torah observances which the Law demanded of them. Unlike their forebears who were sent into exile, they were keeping the covenant. They were bearing the fruit.*

*But Jesus puts a new spin on the parable. Now the land owner is looking for his rent. The tenants who are tending the vineyard, clearly the religious leaders who are charged with tending the nation, they are scoundrels. They beat a messenger, humiliate another, send yet another away empty handed. Finally the land owner sends his son and the idiot tenants see him and think that if they kill him they will gain possession of the vineyard. It is a plan only a fool would consider, but crime is rarely the perpetrated by the intelligent.*

*Jesus loads this at the end with a question, a question which has an obvious answer. The land owner will bring the wretches to a wretched end. It is interesting to see where the editors put the quotation marks. There are none in Greek, so they are a matter of editorial discretion. Many put the words of the answer in the mouths of the scribes, but this editor puts them in the mouth of Jesus.*

*Jesus then quotes Psalm 118, the most often quoted OT verse the NT. Jesus clearly has them in his sights and they know it. The result is not repentance but only an increase in the anger. They will seek his life. They are afraid of the crowd or they would do it like they will do to Stephen in Acts 7. As it is they will try to trap him, send spies against him, and finally, on Thursday, with Judas to guide them, they will find Jesus out of the public eye in a garden, arrest him, and have him on a Roman cross by Friday at 9 AM.*

*The text seems to present the preacher with three things that one can do with this. One could preach the parable that Jesus tells us. This is powerful law, but there is also Gospel in there. The land owner gives many opportunities to these wicked tenants. He clearly wants to establish relationship with them. And Jesus asks the question, perhaps they scribes and Pharisees actually got the answer wrong? Perhaps what the wretches got was actually forgiveness, what if killing that son was the mechanism for the salvation of the whole world?*

*One could preach the fact that Jesus is actually talking to these guys. He seems to be making one last and difficult appeal to them. He speaks truthfully, painfully, but he still talks to them. Like the father in the parable last week, he goes out to see the grumpy elder brother and pleads one more time with them.*

*One could simply preach this text as a prelude to the whole passion of Christ. There is so much happening the following week with Palm Sunday, many won't be there on Maundy Thursday or Good Friday, this might give one the chance to preach the passion story and explain the real horror of what happened there. They killed Jesus for very personal, political, nasty reasons. This was human society and nature at its very worst. But Jesus died willingly for these very people. The stone the builders rejected, Jesus, has become the capstone.*

*What we don't want to do is what these Pharisees and Scribes do? But the temptation is great. Don't we often play it safe? These guys thought that their intrigue against Jesus was the safe course of action, but it carried with it the gravest mortal danger. The Romans who took a very dim view of insurrection looked like the big problem here. Jesus was stirring things up, it was dangerous, much safer to be rid of him.*

*Six years ago Dave Hanel, now in glory, told the story that he had run the risk of letting it out at work that he is a Christian, in fact he was pursuing pastoral ministry. When he did that all the other Christians and several pastors came out of the post-enlightenment "closet" so to speak, and admitted to him that they are doing the same thing. From that day they began to support and care for one another in a whole new way. Do we not run a greater risk by playing it safe in these situations? Notice how much hiding there is in this text. There is all this subterfuge. Dave said that people would come up to up to him and say, "So that's why you act that way!"*

## **Law and Gospel**

**Law:** Isaiah points us toward the fact that much in our life is out of order and that lack of order often is the occasion for tremendous grief on our part. Is it because God is angry with us? Is it because God is simply unable to help us? (Rabbi Kuchner?) Is it because we have failed him? While the catechized Lutheran may rebel at such questions, even the most astutely catechized person is not immune from human nature and the temptations of the flesh. This is one of them.

**Gospel:** God is not angry with us, nor is he incompetent. He is doing something wonderful and new, even now. He is causing his salvation to sprout and grow right before our eyes. This day thousands of new Christians will be made by His Holy Spirit. He is calling forth praise and rejoicing.

**Law:** We are a rebellious people and have a stubborn streak which runs deep and wide through our nature. Isaiah's people would cling to their guilt. Paul zealously pursued his pharisaical righteousness. The Scribes and Chief Priests of Jesus day

should have been the ones to welcome him with open arms. But they killed him. We are too often too much like these people. We often want to play it safe and avoid running the risk. As a result our Christianity is almost a secret thing.

**Gospel:** Jesus made rubbish Paul's past and died for those very same scribes and Chief Priests. He loved the people of Israel and brought them home from exile, even when they were less than perfect, indeed despite themselves.

**Law:** My biggest problems are always self inflicted. I can relate to that stumbling stone causing folks to stumble and trip. Humanity committed a terrible deed the day we put Jesus to death. Here was the one human who did not deserve to die, so we killed him.

**Gospel:** The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone of a new reality, a new thing. Today Jesus calls forth praise from the ostriches and the jackals, the Germans and the aborigines, and even more unlikely sorts than those. A persecuting Pharisee named Saul would pen the words of our epistle lesson today, calling his past rubbish, striving only toward the things Christ gives him. Change is possible in Christ.

### **Sermon Ideas**

1. I Press On (Epistle – that the hearer would join Paul in pressing on toward the calling to which Christ has called them, forgetting what is past, straining toward the future.)

Too often we love to dwell on the past. Our guilt haunts us. We often carry around an enormous burden of our past which Christ has forgiven but we struggle to put down. Isaiah enjoins us to forget the past as well. The preacher might use that; although, Isaiah seems to be talking about forgetting God's mighty deeds.

Can you imagine anyone who had a larger burden to carry than Paul? You might want to remember his words in Galatians 1 and I Corinthians 15 where he reflects on his persecuting past a little more than he does here. Especially I Corinthians 15 he seems to say that he still does not feel like that is behind him entirely. He doesn't feel that he can lay claim to the title of apostle because he is troubled by the past. But the grace of Christ's love has transcended that. He is an apostle. Christ has said so.

Elsewhere in Philippians he uses a running imagery – here the preacher might find something useful. The runner who looks back too much will stumble and fall. He has to push toward the goal which is before him. He has to keep his eyes fixed there.

The preacher will want to think about what sort of burdens are holding us back today? Is it a burden of guilt? Or is it another burden of the past? Is it a missed opportunity? Paul probably left behind some financial security. He clearly left behind some personal

security as his description of what happened to him II Corinthians. He was beaten and tortured, imprisoned, and shipwrecked, and much more.

What do we have to leave behind in this struggle? Paul's old life, the life he left behind as rubbish, sought to establish his identity before God as a work which he did. Paul left all that behind. That is a powerfully attractive thing even for us today. We love to see ourselves as somehow more worthy of God's love than the next person because got something right, even if it is our own faith. Paul left that, and we are called to leave that. Paul's calling came by grace, a gift from God. He had to leave behind that ownership of his salvation. He had to leave behind that sense that he was in control. He had to leave behind that very human sense that he had somehow achieved. He was knocked off a horse on the way to Damascus and from that dusty pavement he was lifted up blind and helpless, his whole world undone by a bright light and a voice.

What attempts to control our world do we still make today? What ways do we tell God what sort of help and rescue he should provide? The preacher would do well to ask this and develop this sermon along those lines. Paul was straining toward Jesus' calling, not his own defined calling. We love to think that we can define the goal.

2. "I count that old life as rubbish!" (That the Spirit of God would grace the hearer's life with the radical humility which brought Paul such Joy. Displaced by Jesus, the world tells us we are fools, but Paul invites us to see a wisdom which transcends all human understanding.)

It seems to me that the challenge for the hearer in most Lutheran parishes today is that we have largely heard the message that we are basically OK, God just needs to do a little cosmetic work, a little tweaking around the edges and we are good to go. This sermon will need to emphasize that even on our very best day, even as Paul says when we are zealous for God, we have a problem. Saul the persecutor thought that he was serving God.

The other temptation for the modern Christian is the pious sort who is so focused on their past sins that they have no really heard the message of forgiveness which God has spoken to them. They imagine that God has not really said it about them, or that if they own that righteous state they will surely fall into some pride, so best just not to go there.

Both of these are forms of pride, but they manifest very differently. The preacher will want to ask which one he needs to approach. For the Lutheran, this is familiar ground, we are sinners and saints at the same time. We never forget the sinner, we always own the saintliness as well.

Paul speaks to us about the radically reoriented life, his own. A life which Jesus amazingly changed on that road to Damascus. He used to think he was pretty amazing for

what he did. He kept the law, zealously, beyond his compatriots. He was the consummate follower of the Torah. But in his Zeal for Moses he forgot the One that Moses served, the One who demanded mercy and love, who gave mercy and love. He had become terribly right, and in so doing had become awfully wrong.

But God came and turned that whole life around for Paul. The very Jesus whom he hated so, whom he persecuted by chasing down his followers and killing them, that Jesus, loved him, and confronted him, and turned him around. What is not perhaps obvious to us, Saul of Tarsus was likely a young Pharisee who was part of that group which questioned Jesus in the Gospel reading. He came to Jerusalem to study under Gamaliel, and we know that Gamaliel was there at this time.

Now there is a very different Paul who writes this letter, a Paul who strives still, but no longer to achieve what he does not have, but toward the very thing which God has freely promised him. Paul works harder as an apostle than he ever did as a Pharisee. He certainly travels farther. The difference is Jesus is now the object and subject of that work. Jesus has removed Paul from the equation in a sense. It is not Paul who is earning or gaining, that was done by Jesus, now Paul is brought to his goals by faith, and that as a gift. The motive for Paul's striving is not to gain/earn something from God, but is a desire God has planted in his heart which is coming out in him. He is not striving to gain heaven, he isn't exactly sure how that will happen; that is in Jesus' hands. He is striving to be the person God has called him to be, he is striving to live up to the name that Christ has given him in his baptism.

He looks back on that old way and calls it junk. But he can look at so much effort, so much wasted time and energy, and smile about it all. He is not disappointed nor angry. It was a loss, it was for naught, but it was made loss and made nothing because Christ came and gave so much more and so much better. Paul had been a really good Jew, he was exemplary, but Christ gave him a gift which in comparison makes all that look like the junk I have put out on the curb for the garbage men to take away.

Paul today invites us into that joy which looks ahead and back to Christ, which orbits around that Jesus, tied to him by the gravity of His love and the gift of his life.

God can work with anyone, no matter what the past. He makes us, creates us as his people, this is not something we accomplish, so even if we were and are still completely messed up, he is not thwarted by that and his love does not find a limit.

3. "Praise from Jackals and Ostriches" (That the Holy Spirit of God would call forth from the hearer words of praise and joy, despite the sinful past, because of Christ's work.)

Here we are talking about the great work of Christ in the life of the Christian. We do not get what we deserve, but instead we get the mercy and goodness of God. Isaiah has us consider ourselves in light of the people of Israel long ago. They did not deserve the

goodness of God. They rightly wondered if God hated them for what they had done. But Isaiah tells them that God will do a new thing. He can even reform the foolish ostrich and the wicked jackal and arrange them into a choir of his praise.

Or just consider the Pharisee Saul who was so sure that he had God figured out. He would earn some extra credit points by throwing a few heretics in jail. Little did he know that these followers of the Way were the precious ones of God. Jesus would turn that life around too. Today Paul calls that old way, that life of buying and earning God's favor rubbish. Now it is all by faith for him. He could not make that change, but God could.

Even the Gospel lesson with its hard words for the leaders of Jesus' day is a marvelous picture of this. Jesus provokes them, not to some fight he will win, but to kill him, because he would lay his life down for these very men who seek it. He will die for them, and so he puts himself in the path of that bus and gets run over. He would save the world this way.

This sermon proclaims that God is really good at working with pretty limited material. It is a transformation sermon. The whole of creation is eventually brought into the praise of God, the place where he had made it to be in the first place. He made it all from nothing, remember. He can make a great deal from you, and he is doing it, just like he did with the Pharisee named Saul, just like he did with the folks of Israel long ago, just like he is doing with you right now.

This sermon almost begs for a powerful illustration. A life turned around. There are the old stock examples of John Newton, the former slave trader who was brought to faith and went on to write "Amazing Grace." You could point to a more modern example of Chuck Colson, the advisor of Nixon whom Christ met in prison and who went on to found an important ministry to prisoners in the US. You could point to someone locally, that is often the most potent. Armenio has some great stories about some folks in his parish who are in some trouble at the moment, even in jail. Here is an opportunity to proclaim that God can work even with this. We sometimes really do some things that are rubbish.

4. The Stone the Builders Rejected (That the Spirit of God would prepare the hearer to observe Holy Week, focusing their attention on the great work of God in Christ's death and resurrection)

This sermon is really embodying Lent as a season. These forty days are intended to prepare us to observe this Holy Week, Palm Sunday, into an upper room, betrayal, death on a cross, burial in a borrowed tomb, resurrection. When you are in the middle of that story, we often don't even have time to think about what it all means. This is the moment to think about what it means, and then, in the Holy Week observance, just to do it.

Of course this is a tall order for any sermon, to lay out the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection, and the temptation for the preacher will be to descend into a cliché. Don't do that.

We will here focus on Jesus' own words to describe what is going on. Jesus speaks these words in first century Jerusalem. One of the largest building projects in the ancient world has recently been completed, the remodeling of the temple in Jerusalem. The rather modest structure which the returning exiles built in the fifth century BC was in need of attention. Herod the Great, eager to win the affection of his subjects, had commissioned a massive rebuilding of the temple. It took over forty years and the building which came out of that process had little in common with the old one. The wailing wall in Jerusalem today is the last remnant of that project. Herod had them cut down the top of the mountain to broaden the platform on which the temple stood. It was considered one of the wonders of the ancient world.

There were lots of discarded stones from such a project. Bo Giertz in *The Hammer of God* speculated that it was a pile of discarded limestone which looked so much like a partially submerged skull that they called it, in Aramaic, Golgatha. We don't know that, but it makes a great story.

Jesus compares himself to one of those discarded stones, an odd shaped one, one that won't sit quite level with the builders, hence they toss it. Yet when they come to the top, the key stone of the arch, they need just such a shape and they pull it off the discard pile and put it in the highest and most important place.

Jesus will be rejected by the "builders," the religious leaders of his day. He will be falsely accused, tried in a kangaroo court, scourged, beaten, crucified and killed. His rejection is sharp and bitter. But God, the ultimate builder, the real builder, will take this discarded stone and put it at the top of all, raising Jesus from the dead and seating him at the right hand, where he rules and lives to this day.

What shocks us even now is that this is not God snatching victory from the jaws of defeat, but it is all part of his strange way. God has already seen this in the days of David when Psalm 118 was written. Again and again in the OT, we see that through the suffering people like Jeremiah, Moses, and others, God worked out his plans. And here, in this strange Friday we will call "Good" God will be working through the salvation of the world.

Jesus today sets up his own demise and his own success. He has come to die for the sins of the whole world, including the very men and women who will demand his death that Friday morning, including the men and women who are sitting in this building even now.

We are about to enter that week which is called Holy for a very good reason. God is afoot throughout those days. We watch and we pray and we listen.