



Sermon Preparatory Notes

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Commentary 1

In Luke, Jesus' death and resurrection is "the Exodus that Jesus [accomplishes] at Jerusalem" (in Luke 9:31, "departure" = *exodos* in Greek).

Jesus leads his followers on the journey to freedom. As the embodiment of God's reign, Jesus gives himself in service to others, using his authority to heal, save, and free. The religious and secular leaders exercise a starkly different authority, the power of darkness that dominates, imprisons, and kills. The whole story emphasizes the dramatic contrast between the kingdom of God and the authorities of this world.

Jesus' Passover meal with his disciples sets the stage for the events that are about to unfold. As Jesus recalls God's liberation of Israel and the covenant made at Sinai, he anticipates the fulfillment of the Passover in God's kingdom. His words point forward both to the heavenly feast and to his presence among the

community when they break bread together after his resurrection (Luke 24:30-35; Acts 2:42-46). Luke's version of the last supper is distinctive, with Jesus offering a cup, then bread, then a second cup after the meal. Some ancient manuscripts have only one cup and different sequences of events in verses 17-20, but NRSV follows the witness of the earliest and best manuscripts both in the order of events and in retaining the two cups.

At the last supper, Jesus models self-giving love. Here at the table he is, quite literally, among his disciples as one who serves. He gives thanks and offers them wine, commanding them to share (*diamerizo*) the first cup among themselves, just as the first Christians will have all things in common, distributing (*diamerizo*) their goods (Acts 2:44). He gives thanks and breaks bread, saying, "This is my body, which is being given for you. Keep doing this for my remembrance." Remembrance (*anamnesis*) is not simply the memory of a distant past; it connects the past with the present and the future, where the living Christ continues to be among his followers, still giving himself for them.

What are they to keep doing? Not only breaking bread together, but giving their own bodies in witness to his love. This is the new community that Jesus forms, created through the new covenant in his poured-out blood.

Yet, even as he pours himself out for them, the disciples fail to live in Jesus' way. At the table with him reclines one who will reward Jesus' giving (*didomi*) by giving him over (*paradidomi*) to the religious authorities, who will bring him to Pilate, who will give him over (*paradidomi*) to be crucified. When Jesus announces this fact, the other disciples react first by arguing about which one of them it is and then by getting into a serious dispute over who among them is greatest (compare 9:46-48). Jesus uses the occasion to contrast God's reign with earthly authority and calls them to continue his ministry by taking their places as servant leaders at his table in his kingdom.

Though Jesus appoints them to positions of authority, they are about to learn their weakness and their need for strength beyond their own. Jesus warns Peter, whom he addresses here as “Simon, Simon,” that Satan has asked to sift all of them like wheat. Jesus, however, has prayed that Peter will not fall away. Over Peter’s protests, he prophesies that Peter will deny him, but tells him to return after his failure to strengthen the rest.

Then Jesus reminds them of the instructions that he had given them earlier, when he sent them and the seventy out to preach and heal (Luke 9:1-3, 10:1-4). Back then they could depend on a warm reception, but no longer. He will soon be regarded as a criminal, counted among the lawbreakers. From now on they, like him, will be rejected and persecuted. Jesus’ command to sell their cloaks and buy swords (22:36) is figurative, a hyperbolic statement meant to illustrate their changed situation.

Commentary 2 by Matthew Skinner, Working Preacher.org

The Gospels' passion narratives press us to consider multiple realities regarding Jesus' prosecution and death

- **We see the politics of human society.** On one level, it's an all-too-familiar story. Powerful and privileged people conspire with Roman officials to engineer the destruction of someone whose message and popularity pose a serious threat to the business-as-usual abuses perpetuated by religious and imperial systems.
- **We see God behind the scenes.** On another level, it's a story of cosmic significance. Having relinquished himself to his Father's will (Luke 22:42), Jesus

embraces a fate that mysteriously aligns--somehow--with a divine design (Luke 22:37; 24:25-27; Acts 4:24-28). Luke's Gospel declares that Satan also plays a role (Luke: 22:3, 53).

- **We see reflections on human responsibility.** There are marked differences across the accounts of Jesus' trial that we find in the four Gospels. These differences draw attention to the questions of "how?" and "why?" that the post-Easter church asked. Anonymous Jewish "crowds" and "people" play roles in Jesus' rejection. In this way, the evangelists attribute theological significance by assigning blame more widely (see Acts 2:22-23; 13:27-28). At the same time, historical analyses of these scenes convincingly conclude that Jesus' movement from Gethsemane to Golgotha would have involved a speedy, clandestine process carried out at the highest levels of Judean sociopolitical power. Common folk probably had very limited involvement, if any.

These three currents flow as a single stream. The Gospels and Acts show no interest in trying to parse the relationship between divine will and human activity, at least not with the precision that would satisfy our philosophical questions. The mixture of realities proclaims that Jesus' execution was the result of willful opposition and tragic ignorance, and yet this ugly death was somehow totally understandable and even purposeful.

(This seems as good a place as any to mention that I've just published a book--titled *The Trial Narratives: Conflict, Power, and Identity in the New Testament*--which explores Jesus' trial in the Gospels and the trials of Peter, Paul, and others in Acts. What I have to say here about Luke's passion narrative is developed in greater detail in chapter 5 of the book.)

The Passion in Luke: A Contest of Wills

Luke's passion narrative frustrates many interpreters. The crucifixion lacks the raw agony of Mark's and Matthew's versions, and there isn't the clearly scripted theological emphasis like John's. Elements of the Lukan trial scenes are bewildering, for it isn't clear what motivates Pilate, Herod Antipas, and "the people" (whom Pilate summons for the first time in 23:13) to act as they do.

In many ways, it's a story about whose "will" or intentions will hold sway, and how.

It's a story that insists that, at the end, God's will is accomplished. Moreover, this will is accomplished by manipulating other powers and the structures of human society. No matter how corrupt or bent on self-preservation those forces are, God's will nevertheless perseveres.

- *Luke 22:14-46*. Jesus prepares his followers and Luke's readers by speaking knowingly and confidently of what is to befall him. Submission, warning, and reassurance are dominant themes.

- *Luke 22:47-71*. The priestly aristocracy of Jerusalem finally have their "hour" (see 22:52-53), and Peter is overcome. The temple-based authorities railroad Jesus toward execution. His words to them indicate that dialogue or persuasion is pointless in the face of their calculated intentions.
- *Luke 23:1-12*. Roman authorities refuse to allow the Jerusalem aristocracy to presume upon Roman muscle to secure their desired outcome. Pilate and Herod mock Jesus, the notion of Jewish kingship, and the priestly prosecutors who breathlessly pursue their case. Roman power plays a game to discredit and humiliate the whole lot of them.
- *Luke 23:13-25*. In a shocking scene, Pilate overplays his hand. He assembles residents of Jerusalem along with the aristocracy, presumably to embarrass the latter in the eyes of the former. But as soon as he broaches the idea of *releasing* Jesus, "the people" resist. They restart the trial by clamoring for Barabbas, a man with perhaps a more impressive track record of pursuing social change. Suddenly the emperor's representative can no longer control the scene. Luke depicts a showdown between what Pilate wants (see *thelō* in 23:20) and the will of the temple authorities and people (see *thelēma* in 23:25). In the background, readers remember Jesus' prayer about his Father's will being accomplished (see *thelēma* in 22:42).

- *Luke 23:26-56*. As soon as the crucifixion begins, Luke begins to mitigate the role of "the people" by distinguishing them from their priestly leaders. Many of "the people" lament in 23:27. "The people" watch Jesus die while "the leaders" scoff (23:35; compare 23:48). Later, in 24:20, Jesus' followers blame only their "chief priests and leaders." As for Jesus, he continues to do what he came to do: accomplish salvation. Witness the criminal who turns to him in their final hours.

Luke offers a *political drama* in which truth and justice are overwhelmed by the will of those who reject Jesus and by the will of a governor bent on exploiting Jesus for political gain.

But Pilate cannot fully control the venue that he is supposedly empowered to control. When the story is done, neither the imperial machinery nor the temple establishment are the agents who ultimately manage (or thwart) justice, at least not in Jesus' case. Nor, really, are the strangely fickle "people."

And so, Luke also offers a *theological drama* in which God's will accomplishes itself *through the course of* human misperception and political maneuvering. In the strange coexistence of these two dramas, Luke declares that God's salvation actualizes itself even within the apparatuses of opposition.

The Passion Narrative, God's Will, and Preaching

Although it is the heart of the Christian story, the passion narrative is not the totality of that story. Luke's account of Jesus' demise compels preachers to consider the passion in light of God's wide-ranging design for the world's salvation.

For Luke, the passion is the pinnacle of the inevitable rejection of God's specially anointed prophet. It is also the route that this Messiah must take toward his eventual glorification.

Jesus' rejection is messy. The participants exhibit behavior that is both familiar and improbable, highlighting the misperception and fear behind it.

By asserting that *God* accomplished God's design through Jesus' passion, even through the messy power struggles waged among those human beings who brought about Jesus' death, Luke hardly fixes everything or makes the passion palatable.

- These assertions raise difficult questions about God and God's ways--questions that must drive us, with preachers' help, to accept mystery. Then we can render praise in response to the clearer statement that God's saving will is done.
- These assertions characterize the world as resistant to God and God's ways. This leads to calls for repentance (see Acts 2:36-39; 3:17-19).
- They rightly give comfort to people who are beaten down by such power struggles on a regular basis,

promising them that Jesus' death and resurrection will one day mean the end to such oppression.

- They warn people who presume that they can find security from God in their institutions and in the trappings of power. They likewise warn those who think that they can create their own social and institutional systems that will align with God's purposes.

God cares too much about the work of saving the world to leave it in our hands. Salvation required God's incursion into all aspects of our existence. It still does.

Commentary 2 by Robert Hoch, Workingpreacher.org
“Which is more amazing,” asks Karl Barth, “to find Jesus in such bad company, or to find the criminals in such good company?”¹

So Barth began his Good Friday sermon on Luke's account of the two criminals with whom Jesus was crucified. Preached for the inmates of the Prison of Basel in 1957, Barth's sermon proves tantalizing as well as instructive even now, nearly sixty years on.

Interpreters will find the sheer expanse of the text assigned for Passion Sunday challenging. How to begin? For his sermon, Barth focused on Luke 23:39-43, the unlikely community of the crucified. With that image firmly in mind, he cast his sermonic eye over the larger narrative, particularly Luke's account of the Lord's Supper in 22:14-23 as well as the contrast between the “indissoluble” community of criminals and the “vacillating” community of

disciples. While you may choose a different image, the strategy used by Barth commends itself.

This text begs for a theological reading and Barth does not disappoint. Barth's sermon delves into themes of solidarity between Jesus and the criminals, but it does not stop there. He describes Jesus' suffering as the visible sign of God's invisible grace. Although it seems impossible on the surface that Jesus' betrayal, suffering, and death could "accomplish" anything good, Barth insists that where humankind intended evil, God produced the good.²

However "distant" our experience of God's work of reconciliation, Luke testifies that in Christ's suffering, God's kingdom has drawn near.

As evidence, consider the paradox of distance and nearness in this text and beyond. Luke plays with the irony of those who are "close" to Jesus (even "laying hands" on him) and yet remain indescribably far from him. A few examples ...

- Jesus immerses himself in prayer while the disciples, who are just a "stone's throw" distant, are overcome with grief and go to sleep (22:45);
- Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss, the kinship of the kiss eclipsed by the enormity of the betrayal (47b);
- Not only does Peter reverse his confession of 9:20, his three-fold denial, "I do not know him!" (57b), amplifies the physical distance he keeps from Jesus in the

courtyard outside the high priest's house where Jesus is being interrogated (22:54);

- Likewise, the Roman soldiers deride Jesus: "Prophecy! Who slapped you in the face?" (64b). What might have been prayer, turns into mocking abuse; those who might have worshipped God, instead abused him.

In each case, the distance seems irrevocable and yet, curiously, Luke insists that Jesus remains radically present to those who would betray, deny, or cast derision upon him.

With the criminals, Jesus' nearness takes on the form of solidarity in suffering, according to Barth. But something greater than solidarity is at stake: "We do well to remember that this [reconciliation] is what those who put him to death really accomplished. They did not know what they did."³ They may not have known, but in Barth's theology, Christ, God's Son, surely knew.

Moreover, Jesus' proximity to suffering is hardly benign or passive. What Barth says of the two criminals that were crucified with Jesus, we might extend to each of the characters in this text: "Nor could they escape his dangerous company."⁴

In Luke's account, distance does not mitigate or otherwise diminish the dangerous company of Christ.

In this connection, Fred Craddock describes three responses to the "spectacle" (Luke 23:48b) of Jesus' death in verses 45-49: (a) in the person of the Roman

soldier (47); (b) the crowds who returned home “beating their breasts” (48); (c) and in Jesus’ “acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee” who “stood at a distance, watching these things” (49).⁵

Craddock recalls earlier uses of this expression at Luke 16:23, 18:13, and 22:54. It turns out that in Luke’s estimation, distance is a tensive rather than absolute quality. For instance, in 16:23, distance awakens the formerly sleepy conscience of the rich man, wallowing in a sea of torment, as he contemplates God’s mercy for poor Lazarus.

It can also be a sign of humility, as it was for the tax collector who stood “far off” from the temple (Luke 18:13). Paradoxically, the tax collector was closer to God in the knowledge of his sin than the Pharisee was in the conceit of his good works.

As a witness to the “spectacle” of Jesus’ death, the Roman soldier watches as a matter of duty rather than devotion (Luke 23:47). The realist artist, Joseph Hirsch, gives us “eyes” to see this distance in his work, *The Crucifixion* (1945). Hirsch places the viewer *behind* the crucified, with all but Jesus’ left arm obscured by the cross itself.

Instead of Christ, an object of religious devotion, the viewer sees the round face and well-muscled torso of a Roman soldier, apparently whistling a cheerful tune as he aims his hammer at one of the iron nails that will fasten Jesus’ arm to the cross.

“*The Crucifixion* reflects a grotesque activity treated as an ordinary task,” comments Robert Henkes.⁶

Hirsch succeeds in conveying the deep disconnect between Christ’s passion and the mindless exercise of duty. However, in Luke’s masterly command of the narrative, even this distance collapses: “When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, ‘Certainly this man was innocent’” (47).

To be sure, this text invites its readers to turn the page, to follow Jesus’ acquaintances and the women who joined him from Galilee, to see what will happen next. Readers familiar with Luke will recall the return of the prodigal son, will remember how it was with the father who saw him, how he was filled with compassion “while [his son] was still far off” (Luke 15:20). Though we may be far from God, God is never far from us.

Even so, on this Passion Sunday, perhaps the sermon should linger in the dangerous space of Luke’s gospel, standing at a distance, “watching these things” (49).

Commentary ESV