

***The Silence of Jesus***  
**A Sermon on Matthew 27:11-56**  
**Passion Sunday**  
**April 5, 2020**

**Introduction**

Every age has its own understanding of the Passion Story. How we understand the death of Jesus says a lot about the problems we are facing in our own time.

Today I would like to explore the earliest understandings of the Passion Story. Then we will look at how Matthew revised earlier understandings of that story. Then we will update Matthew's story and look at how the church throughout Christian history has revised its understanding of the Passion Story, sometimes with disastrous results for Jewish people.

We will conclude with what the death of Jesus means to us today. What do we mean when we say that we lift up the crucified Christ as the one we follow?

**First Move: The First Passion Narrative**

There is no Passion Narrative in the Gospel of Q, which is the oral source that both Matthew and Luke used in composing their Gospels. There is no Passion Narrative in the Gospel of Thomas, part of which was written before anything in the New Testament. Paul's letters are the earliest things written in the New Testament. Paul talks only about the crucifixion of Jesus; he provides none of the other details that are in the Passion Narrative.

The historical Jesus scholars in the Jesus Seminar color everything in the Passion Narrative grey or black. That means it is unlikely to represent historical fact. The only certain statements that we can make about the Passion Narrative with historical certainty is that Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem while Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea from 26 to 36 C.E.

Arthur Dewey, a historical Jesus scholar, has written a recent book called *Inventing the Passion: How the Death of Jesus Was Remembered*. Dewey argues that the Gospel of Peter had a Passion Narrative that was written before the Gospel of Mark. This is the Passion Narrative that Mark used and expanded upon in his gospel.

The Gospel of Peter is one of the other gospels that did not make its way into the New Testament. John Dominic Crossan agrees with Dewey that it is earlier than

any of the gospels in the New Testament. Most likely it was not written by Peter, but by someone who used Peter's name, perhaps by someone in Peter's community.

This Passion Narrative in the Gospel of Peter arose as the early followers of Jesus tried to make sense of the death of Jesus. They thought of Jesus as the Son of Man, the Son of God, the Messiah. He wasn't supposed to die on a cross. He was supposed to bring in the kingdom of God.

Peter's community may have consisted of Jews and Gentiles who gathered together to share common meals. They looked to Jewish Scripture for help in explaining the death of Jesus. They turned to the passages in Isaiah about the Suffering Servant and Psalms about the suffering righteous ones. The Passion Narrative they created is a midrash on these Jewish Scriptures. Midrash is a popular form of interpretation by rabbis that goes beyond the text; it extends the text.

The problem of the suffering innocent one has deep roots in Judaism. The traditional teaching in Judaism was that people suffered because of their sins. That was not consistent with people's experience when they were faithful to the Law and suffered anyway. This problem was particularly acute at the time of the Maccabees in the second century B.C.E. when Jews were executed because they refused to give up the kosher laws and eat pork. George Nickelsburg, a scholar of apocryphal texts, argues these traditions led to the composition of an overarching structure that he calls The Tale of the Persecution and Vindication of the Innocent One. Dewey finds that the earliest Passion Narratives fit this structure, which I have condensed into eight steps:

1. Reason given for the Situation.
2. Conspiracy against the Innocent One.
3. Trial of the Innocent One.
4. Expression of Trust by the Innocent One.
5. Reaction by others.
6. Rescue and Exaltation of the Innocent One, followed by more Reactions and Acclamation.
7. Vindication of the Innocent One.
8. Punishment and Confession by those who opposed the Innocent One.

This Passion Narrative gave comfort to the Jews and Gentiles in Peter's community. Each of these eight steps uses Scriptural language from a Psalm or a Suffering Servant passage from Isaiah. The Passion Narrative that was created in the

Gospel of Peter blames the people for conspiring to arrest Jesus on fraudulent charges and getting him crucified, just as Jews had a history of rejecting the prophets. The people beat their breasts in mourning after the crucifixion when they realize that they have executed the Son of God. The Gospel of Mark leaves out this repentance by the Jews. The purpose of the narrative is not to shift blame. Rather, it proves that the crucified one was innocent and that the people needed to repent.

The Passion Narrative comforts the Gentiles because they felt inferior to the Jews because they had only recently adopted Jewish. It was not the ancient faith of their ancestors as it was for Jews.

Both Jews and Gentiles can identify with the Innocent One. They were humiliated in Roman society, occupying the bottom of the social pyramid. Peter's Passion Narrative unites the members of his community. It gives them a way to reframe their existence and their future together.

## **Second Move: Matthew's Passion Narrative**

Now we can move to Matthew's Passion Narrative. I would like to consider Mark and Matthew's Passion Narratives together. Matthew makes only a few additions to Mark's narrative. Mark's community and Matthew's community are facing different problems from each other and from Peter's community. I will go through Matthew's narrative and point out where it differs from Mark.

Matthew's narrative falls into three parts: (1) Jesus and Pilate, (2) the mocking of Jesus, and (3) the death of Jesus and its aftermath.

Pilate is a Roman governor. The high priests bring Jesus to Pilate because only a Roman governor can order an execution by crucifixion. The Jewish Sanhedrin can order death only by stoning. We could call this another historical certainty. Since Jesus was crucified, we know that his death was ordered by Roman authorities.

Pilate asks Jesus if he is the King of the Jews. We haven't seen this title used since Matthew's infancy narrative when the wise men asked Herod where they could find the King of the Jews. Pilate would view this as a capital charge, challenging Roman authority.

Jesus' answer sounds ambiguous: The NRSV translates it as, "You say so." The Greek text says that Jesus affirms, "You are saying," or "You say." By affirming, Jesus is responding affirmatively.

Pilate then asks Jesus about the other charges brought by the high priest, such as that he would tear down the temple and rebuild it in three days. Jesus is silent. He is modeling the Sermon on the Mount.

Pilate is amazed. This is a very positive word in Greek. To be amazed is to react in wonder and awe. It is as if Pilate recognizes that God is at work in Jesus.

Matthew adds a verse about Pilate's wife to Mark's Passion Narrative. Pilate's wife tells Pilate that he is to have nothing to do with this righteous man. She is suffering from a dream about him. It was believed in those days that God spoke to people through dreams. Only the righteous were able to interpret dreams.

Matthew and Mark are shifting the blame for the crucifixion from the Roman leaders to the Jewish leaders. Mark sees the destruction of the Temple as punishment on the Jews for rejecting Jesus as Messiah. Matthew is written 20 years later, as the followers of Christ are having conflicts with Jews in the synagogue about the future direction of Judaism. Matthew wants to show that the Jewish leaders were wrong about Jesus; they are wrong about the direction of Judaism now.

The Jewish people at the instigation of the high priests elders, demand that Jesus be crucified. These are the same crowds that welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem with shouts of Hosanna on Palm Sunday.

Pilate asks, "What evil did he do?" The highest Roman authority believes that Jesus is innocent. The people again demand that he be crucified.

Matthew adds to Mark's Passion Narrative that Pilate washes his hands and proclaims that he is innocent of shedding the blood of Jesus. Then, in a fateful verse that was used against Jews for centuries, the people say, "The blood of him be upon us and upon our children."

Then the mocking of Jesus begins. Pilate hands Jesus over to Roman soldiers. They strip Jesus of his clothes, the only possession he has remaining. They put him in a red cloak. Red was considered cheap and vulgar. The cloak was a soldier's jacket instead of a royal robe, which would have been purple. They put a wreath of thorns on his head and put a reed in his hand instead of a staff. This reminds us of when Jesus talked about John the Baptist and says, "What did you come into the wilderness to see, a reed shaking in the wind?" The soldiers kneeled down in mock worship.

Then begins the journey to Golgotha that we know today as the Via Delarosa, which has historical markers for the Stations of the Cross. I visited these stations on my trip to Jerusalem in January. I would show pictures of some of the stations if you were here. I was actually put off by the Stations of the Cross. Only two of the Stations are based on Biblical texts. The Stations of the Cross are a product of Late Medieval piety by Roman Catholics. The Stations lead to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, which was built by Crusaders after they conquered Jerusalem. The church is built over what is alleged to be Golgotha, the spot where Jesus was crucified. People in the

Late Middle Ages wanted to be able to visualize Jesus' suffering, which the Gospel writers seem unconcerned about.

The gospels speak more of mocking than suffering. The crucifixion, which means nailing or tying Jesus to the cross, is described in a half verse. Throughout the scourging, the mocking, and the crucifixion, Matthew does not tell us how Jesus responds to the humiliation other than to show that he is silent.

The detailed knowledge of Jerusalem and the Holy Land that was acquired during the Crusades became the basis for 14 Stations of Cross that began appearing on the walls of Roman Catholic churches. Our tour guide in Jerusalem called the Crusaders the Isis of their day.

The bandits who were crucified with Jesus joined in the mocking. So did passers by, who were shaking their heads in contempt. They said, "You said the Temple would be torn down and you would rebuild it in three days. If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." This reminds us of the temptation in Matthew's gospel, when the devil challenges Jesus to prove he is the Son of God by throwing himself off the Temple.

Jesus is silent throughout the mocking. His only words in the Passion Narrative besides saying, "You say so," to Pilate, are his cry from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me." Jesus is quoting the first line of Psalm 22, in which an innocent righteous man cries out to God to be vindicated. Jesus cries out again in a great voice and gives up his spirit.

The death of Jesus provokes a series of supernatural events. The curtain of the Temple is torn in two. This is God's judgment on the Temple. The whole land trembles and rocks are split. This is different from an earthquake; rocks don't split in an earthquake. Matthew adds to Mark's Passion Narrative that the tombs were opened and the bodies of the saints were raised. After the resurrection of Jesus, the saints go into the holy city and appeared to many.

The centurion and his cohort respond to these events in Matthew by saying, "Truly this one was the Son of God." In Mark, the centurion alone makes this confession after he witnesses how Jesus died on the cross. In both Mark and Matthew, the first recognition of Jesus' true identity after the crucifixion is by a Gentile. The centurion vindicates Jesus as the Innocent One.

### **Third Move: The Silence of God**

Ulrich Luz, a Swiss New Testament scholar, points out that the first thousand years of Christian history emphasized the victory of Jesus over death and minimized his suffering on the cross or during his Passion. The ancients preferred John's version

of the Passion Narrative, where Jesus seems to be in control and unaffected. His final words on the cross are, “It is finished,” as if the task that he was sent to perform by God has been accomplished. In Greek theology, the essence of God is to be without emotion. The Logos is incapable of suffering; only the flesh suffers.

That interpretation gave way in the Late Middle Ages to an emphasis on the humanity of Jesus. Jesus through his suffering identified with human suffering. The focus turns to his prayer at Gethsemane and his cries from the cross. The human response to suffering is compassion, empathizing with others as Christ empathized with us.

The Protestant Reformation exalted Christ by emphasizing the depths of his suffering for all of humanity. A universal savior for all of humanity overcomes the universal sins of humanity through his suffering. Evangelical Christianity retains this emphasis. We see it in Mel Gibson’s movie, *The Passion of the Christ*.

Unfortunately, the belief in a universal savior has created a lot of suffering for people of other faiths who don’t want or need to be saved by Jesus. They have their own path to God or the sacred.

The Protestant Reformers and evangelicals who have retained their theology can’t accept that. They still believe that Jews are still condemned by the curse, “The blood of him be upon us and upon our children.” That curse has led to centuries of persecution of Jews as Christ-killers.

A better image for us today is the silence of Jesus. It was a reflection of the earliest followers of Christ on the last servant song in Isaiah 53:7:

He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth;  
like a lamb that is led to slaughter and like a sheep that before its  
shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

The servant is not a pawn in the hands of an arbitrary God. He freely chooses to follow God’s new vision of a higher righteousness in the Sermon on the Mount. He defies worldly wisdom and becomes an instrument of healing. He shows us that the true self lies in service and in solidarity with others, even when it means we must die to ourselves.

The silence of Jesus mirrors the silence of God. Jesus is haunted by the silence of God when he cries out, “Why have you forsaken me?”

We, too, are haunted by the silence of God. Where is God in the midst of a pandemic that is so easily transmitted and has no cure? Where is God in the midst of partisan divisions in which people justify their ideology with different

interpretations of God? Is God really that malleable so as to be used for such different visions? Or is God simply a creation to address our most pressing social problems?

Matthew can help us. Jesus does not overcome or accept suffering. As Ulrich Luz states, “Suffering is simply there, painfully and darkly, like the blackness around us.” There are no magic words to comfort those who are suffering. We cannot know their suffering.

God is present in the darkness of deep suffering. When Jesus suffers, we see that God suffers, too.

The silence of God gives us confidence that God is listening to us. God pays careful attention to exactly what we are experiencing. God with us means that God knows us. God feels our pain, then looks for a way to heal us and transform us.

We must endure the darkness of Good Friday in order to get to the daybreak of Easter Sunday.

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