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Good Shepherd Berkeley

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SUNDAY OF THE PASSION

Year C: Isa. 50:4-9a; Ps. 31:9-16; Phil. 2:5-11; Luke 22:14-23:56 or 23:1-49

We've just heard the story of Jesus' *Passion*. That word "passion" is an odd and interesting word. It comes from a Latin noun that means "suffering." In modern English, it mostly means "intense feeling." Both are appropriate this morning: a story about suffering that evokes an intense response.

But remember, it's a story, and like any story it's bound to mean different things to different people at different times. You can never pin a significant story down to one possible meaning. Sometimes we try. But the story always gets the better of our attempts.

Of all our four evangelists, nobody could tell a story like Luke. Luke's stories unfold with great art. It's often hard to figure out where they're going or what all these characters are really up to. You can get lost in Luke's stories. Trying to sum them up or say "This is what this story is really all about" is impossible.

And still, over the centuries, we Christians have made many efforts to do just that – distill the story into a simple moral, a tag line, a doctrine: Jesus' death means *this*. . .

So the first point I want to make this morning is: Don't fall for that. It won't really work anyway. Start with what spoke to you in the story. What caught your attention this morning? What could you hardly bear to listen to? What relieved the tragedy, even if only for a moment? What have you taken away with you? Or, more precisely, what has stuck to you and refused to be shaken off?

We've also had two other readings from scripture this morning. They represent images the church has found useful for talking about the meaning of Jesus' passion. They don't explain anything. But they put one image alongside another.

The first was from Isaiah, one of the great poems we call the Suffering Servant Songs. Here some nameless person suffers terribly, without having deserved it at all. It would be so easy to be angry at God and to hate the people

committing this wrong. Instead, the suffering servant is so much attached to God, so in love with God, that he continues to trust and to hope that this suffering serves some purpose of value. There's nothing, it seems, that the servant can do to prevent the suffering or to escape from it. The only positive choice left is to move into this catastrophe with dignity and a steady faith. And the servant makes that choice.

It's a strange story in itself. And it doesn't make the passion story any clearer, does it? It doesn't explain anything about it. It just says, "Yeah, this happens. What will you do if you find yourself in such a position? How will you salvage some value, some meaning for your life? Well, here's one possible way."

Then we read a passage from Paul's letter to Philippians. It sounds as if he's quoting a kind of hymn about Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God,

....

emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness

....

and became obedient to the point of death

....

Therefore God also highly exalted him

and gave him the name

that is above every name

that at the name of Jesus

every knee should bend. . . .

Here you have an effort by the very earliest Christians to explain why they found the death of Jesus so significant. Jesus didn't have to die. In Jesus, in some inexplicable way, God lived a human existence. And God actually chose to experience our existence in full, including our human vulnerability, our human death. In Jesus' passion, all the barriers that separate our humanity from God's divinity came crashing down. And this person who was both in the form of God and in the form of a slave erased the distance that had always separated us.

That doesn't really explain much, either, does it? I'm guessing that these earliest Christians didn't really care much about *explaining* the passion. If they'd wanted to *explain*, maybe they wouldn't have resorted, like Isaiah, to poetry.

Instead, they wanted to surprise us – confront us – with the way irreconcilable opposites, divine eternity and human mortality, were reconciled in the crazy story of Jesus' suffering and death and resurrection.

When I look back again at Luke's account of the Passion, it seems focus a bit differently. It's a story about politics and power. That sounds very modern, but it's also very first-century. It's a story about three different centers of power – the Jewish national council, the Roman governor of Judea, the local monarch of Galilee – who play out their power games with one another and then eventually push the mob into doing their dirty work for them.

The Council: "Hmm! This Jesus looks like a dangerous character. And he's very critical of us. Let's turn him over to the Romans."

The Governor: "Hah! So they're trying to get me to take the blame for executing a popular prophet. I don't think so. Send him to Herod."

Herod, prince of Galilee: "Oh, I've been wanting to get a look at him. And Pilate has actually recognized my jurisdiction for once! But the fellow refuses to do any miracles for me! Send him back to Pilate."

The Governor: "Well, for once, Herod's in a mood to cooperate. Chalk one up for him. But I think we'll just release the man and have done with it."

The Council: "No you won't! We'll make sure you're in as much hot water as we are, if you do."

Cue the mob.

It's a story about politics. But it's not just a story about politics, is it? No – because Jesus makes it something more. And there are a few people around – not Jesus' Twelve Apostles, because they've all run away, but a few scattered people who somehow see that something more is going on, that Jesus is the center of this story. He's not just a victim. He's the one who holds the keys of authority and purpose.

The women who followed Jesus from Galilee are there, but they can only watch. One of two criminals crucified alongside Jesus suddenly gets it – too late to save his own life, but still in time to give allegiance to a new way of being. And the centurion in charge of the execution detail, despite his professional interest in believing that anybody who gets himself crucified must have deserved it, takes in the whole event, and says, "Oh, this man really was innocent."

Maybe those few figures in the story are the ones closest to us. They couldn't have given you an explanation of what they'd seen. But each one of them knew that a window had been opened on some reality that they would not be able to ignore. They would remember the *story* instead of trying to reduce it to a moral or a lesson. Maybe one of them was reminded of the passage from Isaiah. Maybe one of them, a decade or two further on, would go on to write that hymn that Paul quotes in Philippians. But the central thing is the *story*, not the explanation. Or, rather, the central thing is the person who dominates the story by being executed for no wrong-doing. He remains central because he opened a way, through suffering and death, into something quite new that we still don't really understand.

But hang onto that. That's what's important here.