

Text: John 19: 16-22  
Title: The First Gospel  
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Chances are that Jesus came into Jerusalem through the Dung Gate.

The south end of Jerusalem is a steady steep slope. Sewage flowed down that slope and out of the city. The Dung Gate is at the base of that hill and garbage was take out through that entrance to be burned outside the city walls. The south end was toxic, smelly, and unsanitary. And, in the grand tradition of environmental injustice, the south end was where the poor folks lived. The south end was the most densely populated part of the city. The south end was where most of the Hebrews lived.

Chances are that Jesus came into Jerusalem through the Dung Gate.

While it probably didn't resemble the sunny sanitized parades of Sunday school flannel graphs, Jesus rustled up a donkey and entered Jerusalem by way of the ghetto. He was greeted by crowds looking for a leader to overthrow the Roman occupation. Longing for a messiah to establish the Kingdom of God, they welcomed him by waving palm branches and shouting old songs of hope and triumph.

Dear friends, Jesus begins the last week of his life  
at the base of that south side hill,  
at the bottom of the toilet,  
and from there he stirs up a stink storm in the temple court.

The temple is set atop that slope. A massive structure, the temple courtyard would have been full of vendors, soldiers, slaves, money changers, and animals. And, it is entirely conceivable that as Jesus came up from the south he would have headed to the temple courtyard, caused a ruckus, and set into motion the events that led to his crucifixion on Friday.

John writes that Jesus was arrested in a garden on the other side of the Kidron Valley. That valley is on the east side of the city. It's a steep but not very deep gully that runs some twenty miles and falls some 4000 feet towards the Dead Sea. The temple is on one side; the garden of Gethsemane is on the other. Judas and the company of soldiers would have crossed the valley, grabbed Jesus, and escorted him into the city through one of the north end gates ~ where the rich people lived. Where they would they encounter Caiaphas, Herod Antipas, and Pilate.

So, from Sunday to Friday Jesus goes  
from the Dung Gate to the seat of power,  
from the backend of the outhouse to the edge of the throne,  
from the bottom of the social ladder to the top rung of the empire.

Our text picks up Jesus being led out to the crucifixion site. There's a variety of traditions and lots of scholarly speculation but there's no clarity about the actual place where Jesus was crucified. What is clear is that crucifixion was a familiar practice.....

The Romans didn't invent crucifixion, but they certainly made it their own as a way to maintain order over subjects and slaves. For example, historians record that about a hundred years before Jesus, Spartacus led a slave revolt that ended in a bloody battle and "six thousand of his followers were crucified along the 130 or so miles of the Appian Way from Rome to Capua, making it roughly one cross every forty yards." (N.T Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*) Or, the historian Josephus describes a revolt in Galilee led by Judas ben Hezekiah in which Varus, the Roman general, puts down the uprising and crucifies about 2000 of the rebels.

I could go on. You get the point. Crucifixion was a tool of the empire to crush rebellions and snuff out hope. Death on a cross could take days and the bodies were left hanging to be picked over by vermin and buzzards and to serve as a reminder....

When we read Jesus says, "Take up your cross and follow..." it seems like a metaphorical nicety, a call to discipleship, but we have no idea how patently absurd that would have sounded to first century Jews who saw their fathers and brothers brutalized by the empire's apparatus of torture.

John writes that Jesus takes up his cross and carries it to where he is crucified. Again, what stands out is the common, mundane, nothing specialness.... John doesn't offer any gory details. The crucifixion is told in the three words of a subordinate clause. It would be hard to be less dramatic. John writes that Jesus is crucified with two others.

*one on each side and Jesus in the middle.*

Now, I know the symbolism here is that Jesus is placed in the middle of human life. This is a Christocentric picture. This is Jesus at the crux of human history, the hinge upon which creation's redemption swings.

But, let us not lose sight that Jesus takes his place between two nameless, faceless, criminals. Jesus takes his place between two families that will be forever ruptured by loss. Jesus takes his place between two more who are tossed aside by the empire. Who knows what they did or didn't do? Who cares? In a culture of mass incarceration and capital punishment their lives barely matter. And there's Jesus, smack dab in the middle.

Pilate has a sign affixed to the cross of Jesus: *Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews*. And in doing so, Pilate writes the first gospel.

Eventually there will be oceans of ink spilled about Jesus, but these are the first words, this is the first written line. It tells who he is, where he came from, and what he did for work. Almost everything you need to know is in those few words ~ except for the deity or divinity part. As one writer puts it this is "the Gospel according to Pilate." And, Pilate has it written in the three major languages of the known world. This is meant to be a universal proclamation. This is so the world may know....

You've got to wonder what Pilate was trying to communicate. Is this the Pilate who pushed back, rejected the charges, and tried to wiggle out of the call to crucify? Is Pilate covering his bases by naming the truth that he was given? Or, is this Pilate nailing up one last mocking taunt?

Historians believe that, in part, crucifixion was a taunt.  
If those who led uprisings thought that they were rising up, well, here you go....

We'll raise you up.

We'll raise you high up for all to see.

We'll raise you high up on this cross.

And so, Pilate raises Jesus up with a title over his head: *King of the Jews*. But, the Chief Priests will have none of it. They want the wording changed. They know they're being mocked as well.

As C.K. Barrett puts it:

*The Jew's objection to the sign was natural. In the first place, they had just declared that they had no king but Caesar, and the sign, if they accept it, was tantamount to an admission of sedition; and in the second place, to suggest that a powerless, condemned, and dying outcast was the king of their nation was a studied insult.*

Pilate lets it stand.

And, Pilate's not wrong.....

Jesus is from Nazareth and he is an extension of David's throne, the king of Jews, the embodiment of the Kingdom of God. Only this king now joins the ranks of those "fettered, spat upon, naked" and executed by the state.

Let's stop right there.

A thoughtful beautiful young woman who was raised in the church said to me recently, "I don't get why Christians are so strict about Jesus. There is nothing wrong with meditation, spirituality, Buddhism, centering in the moment. I mean, it's all about love and being your best self. And Jesus is part of that, but I don't get why they're so strict about Jesus."

She gives voice to the hearts and thoughts of many.

Faith is pragmatic. What matters is what makes our lives healthier, happier, and more whole. So, Jesus is part of a panoply of options, a help, a means to an end. And, church fits into that same spiritual toolbox. What matters is how church makes us feel, what gifts it gives us for living, what relationships it helps us form, what it does for us.....

I'm not going to argue with or belittle that.

In fact, the gospel of John reads that the very Son of God descended from the heights of heaven because he so loves us. Jesus knows the way from God and the way back to God. Jesus came to embody the love of God. Let us be our best loving selves. What's wrong with that?

Again. I'm not going to argue with or belittle that.

There are all sorts of ways to grapple with God in Christ.  
One could do a lot worse.

But.

But the patently absurd and staggering mystery is that the journey of Jesus was unto death. Jesus embodying the love of the God meant crucifixion. It meant being abandoned, mocked, whipped, and suffering what was the lowest, most horrific, death of the day. And...

That's a far cry from anything pragmatic.

That's a far cry from anything healthy, happy, and whole.

That's a far cry from being your best self.

If God in Christ is nailed to the cross I'm not sure that I can just relegate that to one more entrée in a spiritual smorgasbord. The crucifixion rightly drops us in our tracks. Takes away our breath. To sit with the cross too long is to be left speechless.....

So, we are quick to talk about what the crucifixion accomplishes. We are quick to fill the silence with theories about how the death of Jesus pays a price, or satisfies a wrath, or makes things right. We want to answer the questions with an explanation that makes sense. We want something that fits in our tool box.

And yet, dear friends, at least for today, I can't.

I can't explain the descent of God from heaven's throne, to the bottom of a poop-stained hill, to being crucified on a blood-stained plot of land. I can't make it more plausible, palatable, or pretty. I can't make it less monstrous or mysterious. I'm sure there is a time for reflection and theologizing about what "plan" being nailed to a cross fulfilled, but at least for today, I am left with the silence of Pilate.

*What is written is written.*

I can only confess (hope? long for? believe?) that if love prompted God to descend in Christ, then there is love enough for everyone broken and bruised,

love enough for everyone grieving and lost,

love enough for everyone abandoned and addicted,

for everyone stuck in self-loathing or bloated with self-love,

love enough for everyone stuck on death row.

If love prompted God in Christ to descend to death then there is love enough for me, and you, and my young friend. If love prompted God in Christ to descend to death ~ even death on cross ~ then let us join God in exalting him

*to the highest place and give him the name that is above every name,*

*that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,*

*in heaven and on earth and under the earth,*

*and every tongue confess,*

*that Jesus Christ is Lord,*

*to the glory of God the Father.*

Amen.