

“Come Alive”
Easter Sunday, 2018
Text: Ezekiel 37:1-14
4.1.18



Reflection Questions for Personal Use or in a Group Context... (please consider the teaching notes prior to consideration of the reflection questions)

“Do you have a favorite Easter memory? Perhaps you could share it with the group?”

When it comes to the Bible, we have a hard time really hearing the story unless we hear it as a story about us.

“Is there a character from the passion narrative that you feel you identify with most? Why? Is there a response from one of the characters that you find interesting or baffling? Why?”

Jesus’ resurrection was an absolute refusal to be held down by everything that had caused his death. He was a victim, but he refused to be victimized (“*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit*”, “*Not my will but your will be done*”) and, he didn’t seek to make victims out of those who had abused him (“*Father, forgive them. They don’t know what they are doing!*”)

Victimization strips us of our ability to live well because it is forever projecting the responsibility/blame on someone else and, now, we not only have to deal with all that was taken from us, but all that we forfeit through our self-imposed helplessness. The real lie of victimization: “*this is who you are; you deserve this; your condition is chronic*” (this is who you always will be).

“As you reflect on the ways that you may have felt personally been betrayed or abandoned, is there something (or someone) you may need to entrust to God, instead of attempting to manage the hurt alone? How might your ability to ask Father to forgive them prompt your own forgiveness toward them?”

“As you gaze at the cross and empty tomb, what conclusions have you reached? Was this the inevitable consequence of God’s righteous anger or the most inexplicable demonstration of love humanity has ever witnessed?”

“What does the resurrection say about the hopeful possibilities, once you are able to count yourself dead to everything which has cut you off from life?”

Teaching Notes

For centuries, Christ-followers have concluded that Jesus shows us, most fully, who God is, and in so doing, who we were meant to be. Jesus is the perfect representation-- the quintessential image-bearer--- as reflected in Genesis [... *the Son radiates God's own glory and expresses the very character of God...*] Hebrews 1]

The Easter narrative tells us things we didn't expect to hear, things we weren't ready to accept, and things we could never fully explain.

Some theologians suggest that the gospels are all “passion narratives” with really long introductions.

There is very little attention given to the birth of Jesus and an extraordinary amount given to his last few days. The remainder of the space is occupied with Jesus' teachings, personal encounters, meals and miracles, all of which were ways of embodying his conviction that Israel's hope for the Kingdom to come (in the long-awaited Messiah) was now coming true in him.

Incarnation: *“I want to be with you.”*

Kingdom teaching: *“I am available to you.”*

Passion week: *“I am for you.”*

I believe that there is something about the cross that will prove offensive to us all.

“The message of the cross is foolish to those who are headed for destruction! But we who are being saved know it is the very power of God.” 1 Corinthians 1:18

~ If we assume that Jesus was simply another delusional peasant boy with a ‘messiah complex’, we will be offended at his mistreatment. We should have noticed and got him the *“help he needed”* earlier.

~ If we believe that Jesus was God, we are offended by his vulnerability and willingness to succumb to such injustice [... *he saved others, but he can't save himself. What kind of King is this?*] Matthew 27]

~ If we conclude that Jesus was revealing something of the human-dilemma, we will be offended by the notion that we are somehow being implicated here as the betrayers and deniers in need of mercy and forgiveness.

~ If we believe that Jesus was the Messiah and that he has called us into a similar kind of *‘cruciform life’*, we will be offended at what the cross demands of us. It

says that we cannot continue to hold onto hatred and unforgiveness and thoughts of retaliation.

There is no singular answer to the question, “Why did Jesus die?”

You could say that all the claims of his kingship were seen as a threat to the Roman empire and he needed to be eliminated, and you would be right.

You could say that that he was killed because the religious leaders declared him to be a blasphemer over his identification with God, and you would be right (John 10:33; Luke 5:21; Matthew 26:65).

You could say that he was killed because he openly challenged the injustices and abuses that characterized a temple system meant to connect people with God, and you would be right.

You could say that Jesus died because of the sin of the world and for the sin of the world, and you would be right (John 1).

You could say that no one really *“took his life from him but that he willingly laid it down for others”* (John 10), and you would be right.

“Beginning with Moses and the prophets...” (Luke 24)

The Jesus Event only makes sense as it is told as the climax to the story being told by Moses and the Prophets.

For the Jews who held to the story, God would one day come back to his people, he would bring them back from ‘exile’ and restore their identity/mission and takes his rightful place as the world’s true King. “Resurrection” was part of the package deal.

According to the Story (and tradition), resurrection was understood to be the “reversal” or the “undoing” of death: humanity’s greatest enemy. It was thought to be the great event that God’s new day had arrived.

No matter how many ‘sub-plots’ there are in the biblical narrative, they all converge on one main theme:

“...that God was, in Christ, reconciling the world to himself” (2 Corinthians 5:14-21)

This is God, taking back all that rightfully belongs to him, and restoring it so that it better reflects its creative intention (glory). This is God dying **“with”** us; God dying **“for”** us; God dying **“instead of”** us.

The cross is a vital aspect of the story, but only as it moves us toward the tomb and, ultimately, to the resurrection... the new life and new trajectory that the cross/death was meant to allow us to realize.

“And if Christ has not been raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your faith is useless.” 1 Corinthians 5:14

Yes, we are implicated in the events of the Passion week, but we are also strangely the beneficiaries of its work.

“By his stripes, we are healed...” (Isaiah 53)

“...[he] looked and saw evil looming on the horizon, so much evil and no sign of justice. He couldn’t believe what he saw: not a soul around to correct this awful situation. So, he did it himself, took on the work of salvation, fueled by his own righteousness” (Isaiah 59:15-16).

I think a gospel that simply offers us forgiveness for our sin and safe-passage into the afterlife but is unable to provide freedom from our self-destructive attachments, life in the places of death, and wholeness in the places of my brokenness is not robust enough to be considered good news.

In this seemingly “odd”, Easter text, Ezekiel is offered as a priest living in Jerusalem during the first Babylonian attack who is commissioned to speak amongst the people for God. He accuses Israel of “infidelity” and “hard-heartedness”. He says that the people have offered their allegiances to other gods (attached their hearts to something other than god), which has had dramatic spiritual and social impact (injustice). **“Guilty”**.

This judicial posture of judgement has been the one most often utilized to capture the nature of God’s response to the people’s rebellion: they are guilty of violating God’s covenant and, therefore, simply getting what they deserve.

But Ezekiel offers what for many of you might be a *surprising side of God*. He has God, not distancing himself in some relational form of shunning, but actually with the people, in the exile. He will utilize the very environment which seems punitive as a means of restoration.

At the end of chapter 36, he indicates that God will deal with his people in a way that will not simply provide a new set of rules or a new religious paradigm in which they might function, but he will actually “transform” them. He will mysteriously exchange their heart which is unresponsive and unaware, for one that is “softened” and surrendered.

In chapter 37, God gives Ezekiel this vision of a valley that is littered with dry skeletal remains. He says that this is an image, a picture, which represents their present condition. He tells Ezekiel that his Spirit is coming to bring these dead bones back to life.

It harkens back to the Genesis story of God creating humans and what made them living creatures was when he “blew the breath of life into them”. Humanity’s only hope is that God would do a new “creative act” which would allow humanity to function properly.

The judgement we experience often comes as a result of God’s willingness to love us even more deeply in our failures.

Ezekiel says that Israel will feel “*ashamed*” and “*reduced to silence*” when God forgives them. Grace leaves them speechless (16:63).

Grace is always a painful blow to our stubborn commitment to orchestrate our own salvation. In a solutions-oriented culture, we are always more comfortable with our problem-solving abilities than rescue. What we want is resurrection-life without death. We want the solution without the surrender.

In order to be compelling--- in order to capture our hearts--- the Jesus event must be viewed as restoration and not just punishment.

Please don’t conclude that I am questioning the reconciling work of God, accomplished by the death and resurrection of Jesus. My only concern is that the event is often limited to simply some punitive expression, rather than God’s free and faithful capacity to love and forgive his creation.

I’ve always found it more comforting and appealing to know that Jesus died for me, not simply because he had to in order to satisfy some cosmic demand, but because he wanted to in order to win back my heart. Because he wanted to, not because he had to.

Easter offers us the opportunity to tell the truth about ourselves. To stand before all that is difficult and provocative. To identify with all of its injustice and mercy and walk into new life.

The story invites you to stand with Jesus before all of the dead places in your life and hear Jesus call you, as he did Lazarus, back to life. “***Come out! Come alive***”.

Luke 24:13-34 (read sometime today as a part of your Easter reflection)