

**“The Shame and Glory of the Cross” based on Luke 19:28-32 and Luke 22:66-23:49
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on April 13, 2025, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

Today, we celebrate Palm Sunday, marking Jesus’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Our call to worship adapted the version that Luke gives us, in which the disciples who have traveled from Galilee to Jerusalem are celebrating Jesus as a king, riding into the great city on a colt (or a donkey, or a mule, or some smaller beast of burden). These disciples spread their clothing on the animal, and in the road, making a path for Jesus to enter in peace. We joined the crowd in our responses, declaring, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest!”

Then in the account of the crucifixion, we participated as Jesus’s accusers and a hostile crowd. The choir read for us the charge – “This one we found corrupting our nation” – and before long, all of us joined in crying out, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” How did it all come to this? Why have we turned our backs on Jesus?

To understand this, I want us to imagine ourselves in this story. It’s a very familiar story if you’ve been in the church long enough but imagine yourself now as if you’re there. Then we will look at how the writer of Luke sees these events and then consider what this says about us today.

First of all, Luke (and Mark) separates the two crowds – the first is made up of Jesus’s followers from Galilee. The second crowd is at the praetorium, which used to be the palace of Herod the Great. This is a crowd of Judeans, the locals, and not necessarily the followers of Jesus who came from Galilee. Matthew and John leave this ambiguous, not saying delineating one way or the other.

Still, the reality is that both crowds are believers in Israel’s God, and each is trying to make sense of who Jesus is. The first proclaims him as the fulfillment of prophecy, while the second crowd sees him differently – namely, as a threat to their way of life.

Each of us has a worldview based on the culture in which we live and our beliefs. So then, imagine yourself now in the shoes of the Judean leaders and the hostile crowd. You know the story of your people. You are in Jerusalem for the Passover, to celebrate God delivering you from bondage in the land of Egypt. Once you were enslaved by the empire, the greatest of its day, but God delivered you. God brought you to the promised land.

Now, in Judea, you are under the rule of another empire, and you have negotiated peace with the empire of Rome. You are able to practice your faith in the temple, but this peace is tenuous, at best.

Some have tried to overthrow Rome – This guy Barabbas took part in an insurrection in the city. Scholars rightly note that Rome was not in the business of pardoning insurrectionists. But it’s not difficult to imagine a government going against its best practices, especially when it’s convenient and might suit the goals of a leader like Pilate.

Pontius Pilate’s first priority is to avoid an uprising during Passover, and avoid have that kind of mess up reported back to Rome. It would have been a report that he was a failure and a shame to him. So, then it’s not hard to imagine him wavering. After all, Jerusalem is overcrowded with pilgrims, most of whom are hostile to Roman power. His decision was likely well calculated here.

Do not, however, misread Pilate here as being sympathetic to Jesus. He is pragmatic. He is doing what he thinks is best for his interests. He wants to make a statement with crucifixions at this festival that rebellion will not be tolerated. Rome will not, under his watch, be like Egypt. And now, here, a very vocal crowd claims Jesus is the greater threat to Rome’s power than even Barabbas.

The leaders have brought him forward as the real threat to Rome. Pilate may not see him as a typical threat, but he gives in to them. After all, even if Jesus himself is not desiring a revolt, the mob is now threatening one. For Pilate, it makes no difference which measly Judean is crucified, as long as peace and order are maintained by publicly shaming revolutionaries on Roman crosses.

Pilate does not live in Jerusalem but has come from Caesarea, most likely, with a garrison of troops. Some speculate that Pilate's procession offers a contrast to Jesus's entry into Jerusalem. Roman processions were an expression of military superiority and supremacy. With the leaders on horseback, they represent a readiness for war. This show of strength was meant to intimidate the people. If you were there, you might be worried by this show of power and fear that anything out of line you might do will incur wrath – or worse, the wrath of Rome's imperial forces.

This is precisely what happened later, when the Judeans rebelled, and the temple was destroyed. At that time, the new Emperor Vespasian and his son/successor Titus held a procession in Rome to brag about all the wealth they had stolen from the newly conquered Judea.

Now, from your perspective, as you're watching, you hear your Judean religious leaders say Jesus is corrupting the nation. They say that he is offering a strange concept of worship centered on who he is. In the paragraphs from the end of Chapter 22, Jesus called himself the Son of Man, saying he would be seen riding on the clouds in glory. This is a reference to the Prophet Daniel where one like a son of man enters into the throne of God – revealing he is one with God.

Then, the high priest clarifies in Luke's version asking, "Are you the Son of God?" Jesus responded, "You say that I am." At first blush, it sounds like a deflection, but upon these words, he is condemned. That is because what Jesus says may be better translated, "You say it, because I am." Jesus is invoking the name of God – YHWH – which means, "I am who I am" or "I will be who I will be." The so-called corruption that Jesus offers would center worship on him, NOT the temple.

Jesus is the true temple as the meeting place of God and humanity. As a Judean, the temple was not just your religion. Your whole life centers around the Temple. It's the center of your government, and the main entity that has negotiated peace with Rome. Is following this Jesus worth risking your comfort? Is it worth risking the connection to power that you have?

Believers – both then and now – are tempted to prioritize power, popularity, and prosperity over the challenges that come with truly following Jesus, walking toward the cross in our own lives. As Christians, we imitate the world. We want to be winners on the world's terms. This tempts us to chase after the comforts and advantages of this world and make pragmatic choices to explain away Jesus's tough and difficult teachings, and hard example.

If we are to be Christ like, it means riding that beast of burden, not a beast of war. This means Christian witness is not about owning our enemies but working with them. As Jesus put it, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Jesus in Luke's gospel as we talked about earlier this year, says, "Blessed are the poor" meaning the beggars, the lowly. The Kingdom of God is theirs. Jesus then says, "Woe to those who have plenty" – the rich – "for you have already received your comfort." The hungry will be satisfied, and the well-fed will starve.

This is a comfort to those with nothing, but what about for us? We are the ones stuck in the middle. We are not richest and most powerful, but by no means are we in this church destitute and powerless. We are stuck in that middle zone. So where will our allegiance, our faith, be pointed when Jesus comes calling for us?

Jesus offers us a strange religion based on a God who is humble and loving. Jesus shows us a God who is humble enough to have entered into our flesh to be human being just like us. This is a God who is loving enough to have lived in all of our limits, even death, dying for us a shameful death on a Roman cross. He dies at the hands of worldly power, betrayed by those closest to him. Remember this was all done “for us.” God does not need us. Yet God wants us and loves us – all of us.

I believe this is what Luke is setting up for us to recognize in his portrayal of the cross. As a former journalist, I love seeing four gospels showing slightly different perspectives, because it’s good to explore each one. In Luke we see an emphasis that the people who condemn Jesus are doing so thinking that they are doing what is right.

The Pharisees and Sadducees are on God’s side. They believe they rightly interpret God’s word. By this, the Pharisees desire to protect the Torah and its instructions. The Sadducees desire to protect the temple and its sacrifices. Pilate believes that Rome is ordained by his gods to rule. The Pax Romana, or Roman Peace, is his priority, and keeping the peace means suppressing riots, insurrections, and rebellion with force. You do that by using crucifixion liberally. That’s because it is a means to shame rebels, and also, scare off, the would-be rebels.

All of this comes to a point with Jesus’s words of mercy from the cross, “Father, forgive them, they do not know what they’re doing.” Beloved, make no mistake, the cross was not simply a means to kill someone. That’s because unlike lethal injection, or the guillotine, or even the electric chair, the cross was not simply seen as a means of capital punishment. Cato was killed by being forced to kill himself. Paul, as a citizen of Rome, was likely beheaded. Both were seen as dignified and humane deaths. No, the cross was meant to shame the person. You hanged them there naked, to slowly suffocate, and be picked at by birds, as they stayed there for hours upon hours.

And yet, this is the moment that Jesus comes into his glory as King. James and John earlier in the gospel asked to be at his right and left when you Jesus came into his glory. Jesus says, “You don’t know what you’re asking! Those places have already been chosen. Now, in his glory, there he is hanged shamefully on a tree and two rebels, called “evildoers” or “criminals,” are hanging at this right and at his left.

One chooses to join the crowd in condemning Jesus, wanting Jesus’s power to save him. The other trusts Jesus at his word. He wants Jesus to remember him in his Kingdom. And so, Jesus says to the second one, “Today, you will be with me in paradise.” Beloved, when we hear the jeers of the first rebel, along with the Judean leaders, and the Roman soldiers, we hear them as mocking.

They are mocking him, absolutely. But also, they are challenges – “If you really are...show us and we’ll believe.” They want Jesus to give them a reason to believe in him. They don’t think it will happen, so they’re mocking him, but they are convinced that if he came down, then they would really believe in him. But the second rebel doesn’t put Jesus to the test. He recognizes Jesus, and perceives his glory, even in the cross.

Beloved, it is fitting that on this day, we participate in the reading of this narrative as a congregation to proclaim both the excitement of the disciples at the start, and the frenzy of the crowd that convicts Jesus and sends him to the cross. Both are fervent in their belief that they are doing the right thing – and for the latter, Jesus says, “Forgive them, they know not what they do.” The truth of the gospel is that to be at one with us, God became one of us. This was so that all of us – the entirety of humanity from every nation – might be reconciled to God in Christ Jesus.

If defending the faith requires having an enemy and an “us vs. them” mentality, so that we might have the power to defend our way of life and religion, then we are choosing the path of those who

condemned Jesus. Jesus demonstrated for us that defending the faith is about humility and love. It is about enduring through the challenges, even the sufferings we face in this life, so that we might love and serve one another, just as he came not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many.

I have a lot of compassion for the Pharisees and Sadducees, because it's tempting to think we've got all the answers. It's tempting to think we need to protect the faith. It's tempting to think we need to protect our way of life, and we need to protect our identity as believers in God. But Jesus shows us God doesn't need us to do that.

God does not desire victory by our power, our popularity, and our prosperity. No, God offers victory in doing what is right to love and serve one another. Yes, this includes even our enemies – the people we do not like or disagree with as much as it includes our family, friends, and our wonderful church neighbors. We're all called so that God and God's love can be seen in and through us because we are empowered by the Holy Spirit, which lives in and among us as God's community.

The Spirit is with us to comfort us, and yes, to turn us away from sin in our own lives. The Spirit is with us to transform our minds so that every day we might come to more and more resemble Jesus Christ, our Lord and our God, our brother, who hanged on that cross for us, rose for us, ascended for us, all because of his love for us. Amen.