

Christ Community Covenant Church
Chapter 23, The Story: Jesus' Ministry Begins
Pastor Mike Brown - March 11, 2012

Sermon in a Sentence: Learning to minister in the way of the Suffering Servant.

Congregational Reading

Luke 4:14-21...and so the ministry of Jesus begins.

Introduction—Chapter 23

Review

Recall that we are now in the New Testament of The Story. Last week Dave talked with us about the inter-testamental period and we celebrated Christmas Day, the birth of Christ. Dave challenged us to look into our lives at those places where we are the Innkeeper, refusing, because of the fullness of the "inn" of our personal lives, to allow Jesus in.

Transition

Now we turn to chapter 23, the beginning of Jesus' ministry. I would give you the page number, but quite frankly we are not going to be in that chapter at all. You see, one of the "jobs" of a pastor is not to prevent suffering in the flock, but to prevent suffering for the wrong reasons! So, for me, this sermon began more than a year ago when a friend posited that we, as Christians, do not know how to suffer correctly and, therefore, we suffer poorly. I was challenged to think about my own theology of suffering. And I have. I am the sort who is particularly attentive to my own suffering, and aware to greater and lesser degrees to your suffering and that of the world around me. For more than a year I have been asking God to help me make sense of it.

Recently I read a theology book written by theologian Alan Lewis that he finished as he was dying of cancer.¹ He died before the book was published. Today, I will follow his thinking as a broad framework for my own theology of suffering, from which is, I believe, the only way we can make any sense of Jesus' ministry. So, here we go; my work in progress...

Lent

Part of my theology of suffering is to remind us that we are in the season of Lent. Lent is that time, you remember, that begins on Ash Wednesday when we reenact Jesus' forty days in the desert by engaging in prayer and fasting. Lent lasts about 46 days; we don't count the Sundays. So, for 6 days each week we dwell in the doubt, despair, and desolation brought about by our sin and then on each Sunday we celebrate the faith, hope, and love offered by Christ. It prepares our hearts for the glorious resurrection on Easter Sunday.

Prayer

Introduction - The Purpose of Jesus' Ministry

What was the purpose of Jesus' ministry? We just said it together. Luke tells us straight away in His gospel. Jesus, at the beginning of His public ministry, is in a local synagogue and reads from the prophet Isaiah (61:3b):

¹ Lewis, Alan E. (2001). *Between Cross & Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the Gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18-19).

It is a continuation of the Exodus Story: God frees His people from captivity. The purpose of Jesus' ministry touches me to my core. I know I need His "freeing" in my life. But there is something about Jesus' ministry that troubles me. In a familiar verse, written on our back wall, Jesus says:

"I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me", (John 14:6).

The "way of Jesus." It is this "way" that Jesus goes about freeing us that nags at me.

Boundary Day

I can think of no better place to begin looking at the way of Jesus' ministry than to skip to near the end of the gospel accounts of His ministry on earth.

Turn with me to John 19:42, we pick up the story just after Jesus' death--
Therefore because of the Jewish day of preparation [Friday], since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there. Now on the first day of the week [Sunday] Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb while it was still dark, and saw the stone already taken away from the tomb.

Now maybe it is just me; perhaps only the way I think...however, I'm convinced that the key to understanding the way of Jesus' ministry is right there in the space between those two sentences. Perhaps it will help to diagram it a bit differently to see what I mean:

Good Friday--Therefore because of the Jewish day of preparation, since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

Holy Saturday--The space between the sentences.

Easter Sunday--Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb while it was still dark, and saw the stone already taken away from the tomb.

To understand Jesus' ministry I want to focus on a day that is largely overlooked in the modern protestant church, the day between these two sentences, a day the church calls Holy Saturday. At 4Cs, we celebrate Ash Wednesday, which is the beginning of Lent; the Lenten season; once since I've been here we have celebrated Maundy Thursday, the day of the Last Supper and Jesus' capture, though we usually combine it with Good Friday; Good Friday, the day of Jesus' crucifixion; and finally Easter Sunday, the day of Jesus' glorious resurrection. On each of these days something is happening that we can see, the Story is progressing along nicely. However, I think we overlook the day that is absolutely pivotal to our knowing God as He has chosen to reveal Himself to us in the person of Jesus Christ and to our understanding the true nature of Jesus' ministry on earth and His continued ministry. Holy Saturday is the space between the sentences when nothing seems to be happening, when God seems most silent.

Holy Saturday is a boundary day. Now boundaries are often characterized not by what they are but by what they separate. We have the boundary between air and water, between atmosphere and space, between states or nations, and between good and evil. The interesting thing about boundaries is that they rarely exist in and of themselves. As a pilot I never once looked down at the ground and saw the black line separating states or nations. And so it is with Holy Saturday. It is a boundary day. It is the silent space between two sentences in John's gospel. For Mark, too. Luke briefly merely mentions that on that day, the Jewish Sabbath, the women followers of Jesus rested, and Matthew only talks of the Jewish leaders approaching Pilate to ask for a guard to prevent Jesus' followers from tampering with the grave. In the gospels, it is a day that virtually doesn't exist. A boundary day, a day "between."

But, a boundary between what? What does it separate? To quote author Lewis, Holy Saturday is “both the day after the end of life and the day before the end of death.”² The day after the end of life [Good Friday] and the day before the end of death [Easter Sunday], it is a boundary day.

Hearing the Story

Let me unpack this a little bit by letting you hear the story of Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday three times this morning. In your first hearing I'm going to ask us to put ourselves in the place of Jesus' followers as Jesus' ministry unfolds and not as those who view it backwards across time. Your second and third hearings will be with our full knowledge of Easter Sunday.

The First Hearing--A Day of Doubt & Faith

So, your first hearing, imagine with me...Over the past three years you have walked with Jesus, watching Him:

- ***Routinely perform unimaginable miracles.*** He healed the blind and the lame, brought hearing to the deaf, cast out demons, raised the dead, stilled the wind and waves, and even changed about 150 gallons of water into wine. With Jesus, these miracles became, well, common events.
- ***Teach radically and authoritatively.*** He stood fearlessly, toe-to-toe with the Sadducees, Pharisees, and Scribes (lawyers) arguing with them and openly confronting them with the burdens above and beyond the law that they had placed on you; finally, here is someone to fight for you against the religious establishment.
- ***Have compassion for the lost.*** It was beyond what you have seen before. There was something about His eyes when He looked at the outcast and the marginalized.
- ***Prayer!*** My goodness, He called God “Daddy.” You, on the other hand, have been taught all of your life never to speak the name of YHWH and He is calling God, Abba.
- ***Pronounce the forgiveness of sins,*** making Himself equal with God.

“Who is this guy?” you wondered. Could He really be the Messiah?

Through these three or so years you have followed Him. You have heard Peter, one of His closest confidants, exclaim that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, and Jesus Himself confirmed it (Matthew 16:15). Finally, just yesterday, after an odd sort of Passover meal Jesus hosted and after He washed your feet and after He didn't finish the traditional four toasts, saying something about waiting for another meal, you said with the others, “Now we know that You know all things, and have no need for anyone to question You; by this we believe that You came from God” (John 16:30). He must be the long-awaited Messiah! There can be no doubt! Your mind races, your heart pounds, and your head swirls with the possible implications...or maybe it is just the Passover wine.

With your friends you get up from the meal and walk with Jesus to the garden you have been to with Him many times. He goes off by Himself to pray. All seems normal...and then, even now it is all a blur. A screaming mob, torches, the flash of a sword, you are running for your life. There is a kangaroo court, Jesus is scourged and then hung on the cross like a common criminal—you will never forget that image—and now He is dead. Jesus is laid out in the cold, blackness of the tomb. It is Friday night. You fall asleep in exhaustion.

And now it is Saturday morning. Did yesterday really happen? Was it all a dream? Reality sets in. What are you thinking today? What do you feel today?

This is the first Holy Saturday, the boundary day from which you can only see backwards; you see only the end of life. Easter Sunday, the end of death, is still in the future, unknown to you. There seems to be no hope for you on this first Holy Saturday. Jesus is dead. There are only two possibilities open to you

² *Between Cross & Resurrection.* 66

now. The first is that you backed the wrong horse. Jesus was not the Messiah. But just 36 hours ago, Thursday night, you were so sure. Was He some kind of magician? But how did He do those healings? How did He walk across the lake? How could He speak so directly into your heart? But, HE IS DEAD. That fact beats like a drum in your head. Your stomach churns. If Jesus was not the Messiah, then you must begin waiting again, weighted down by the burden of the Law.

But wait! There is another possibility, and it is worse yet. What if Jesus was the Messiah of God, the promised and long-awaited deliverer of Israel? THEN HE FAILED! God's Anointed One has been defeated by the forces of darkness and evil. You remember Jesus' cry, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34) But on this day there is only silence from God. God must be too weak, too submissive; in the end Jesus succumbed to the overpowering forces of evil. It must be too late even for God! After all that God has done, the plagues on Egypt, parting the Red Sea, miraculous military success, bringing Israel back as a nation following the exile...after all of that perhaps now evil has grown so strong that we are now beyond God, beyond all hope. Evil triumphs and celebrates.

We, like Jesus' followers would be dazed and confused. It wasn't supposed to be like this, was it? This is not what we expected! They, we, doubt God. Take a moment and try to feel the doubt of Jesus' followers on that first Holy Saturday.

---SILENCE---

Perhaps Joshua felt the same doubt as the Israeli army suffered its first defeat in the Promised Land. Listen to Joshua's doubt--(Joshua 7:2-9).

But doubt is not what Jesus experienced. Jesus had faith in His Father. Repeatedly, Jesus said He would be raised (e.g., John 2:19-21, 10:18; Matthew 12:39-40). Jesus believed it.

On Holy Saturday we doubt because Jesus is often not what we expect. Holy Saturday is where we stand on the boundary between our doubt and Christ's faith.

The Second Hearing--A Day of Despair & Hope

In this hearing, we know of Easter Sunday. We know that Jesus is the God-man. We know, because the Apostle John has told us, that God is love (1John 4:8); therefore, Jesus is love. So, in the gospels we watch Jesus love. The compassion He has for the sick, the blind, the crippled, the lost...he raises a son from the dead so that an old woman would not be left without care; He brings a friend back to life. Kids flock to Him. He offers hope to the downtrodden with words like these:

- Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God;
- Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted;
- Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

No one else has talked that way, ever offered such hope to the marginalized of society.

And, He offers tough love by taking on the Pharisees and other leaders who would make life with God unattainable for the common folk. "Grace and truth" is the way that John describes Jesus' love (John 1:14).

Our bumper-sticker theology says, "make love, not war." The Beatles say, "Love is all you need." Is it? On this Holy Saturday, perfect Love, in the person of Jesus Christ lay dead. Love, personified in Jesus, has succumbed to evil. Even the love of God seems too weak to stop the onslaught of hate. Jesus said He could call down twelve legions of angels when surrounded by the mob. Instead, He gave in to them, like a sheep being led to the slaughter (Psalm 44:22).

We are again dazed and confused. It isn't supposed to be like this, is it? This is not what we expected! Jesus should come in power, shouldn't He? Rather, He came in meekness and humility and was

overcome. he responded to evil with good (Romans 12:21) and was killed. We despair in the seeming weakness of Jesus' love. Our enemies sneer at us and taunt us, saying "Commit yourself to the Lord, let Him deliver you" (Psalm 22:8). Recall such a time in your life. Take a moment and feel the despair of suffering Love in the tomb on Holy Saturday.

---SILENCE---

Let's hear the despair of King David as he laments the betrayal by a friend--(Psalm 55:4-14).

But despair is not what Jesus experienced; He had hope in the ultimate power of love. "Greater love has no one than this," Jesus says, "than to lay down his life for his friends." On Holy Saturday we despair because our love is often rewarded with hate. All around us it seems as if evil is winning, taunting us in our weakness. But Jesus knows that from weakness comes strength, from death, life. Holy Saturday is where we stand on the boundary between our despair and Christ's hope. Love may not triumph in the short-term or even in our lifetime; however, we have hope in Christ that love triumphs in the end.

The Third Hearing--A Day of Desolation & Love

The third hearing. Again we examine the story and hear Jesus. On several occasions religious leaders tried to stone Jesus for making Himself equal with God (e.g., John 8:59). In a culture where the name of God was not allowed to be spoken, Jesus called Him "Abba," daddy. Repeatedly Jesus said "the Father and I are one" (e.g., John 5:18; 17:23). When asked by His disciples that He might show them God, He responded by saying "anyone who sees Him has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

Jesus is God incarnate. The Apostle Thomas, upon seeing the resurrected Jesus declared, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28). Our creeds tell us that Jesus was fully God and fully human. And yet on Holy Saturday God, in the person of Jesus, lay dead. On this day we recall the cry of Jesus on the cross: "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (Mark 15:34). Today, Jesus' body lies in the tomb and Jesus has descended into hell (1Peter 3:18-20). God is silent; God the Father, it seems, has forsaken God the Son.

Like the first two hearings, we again find ourselves dazed and confused. It isn't supposed to be like this, is it? This is not what we expected! God the Father would not forsake His own Son, would He? Jesus' cry is our cry. In our circumstances we cry out, "Where are you God?" Recall such a time in your life. Take a moment and feel the desolation of the abandonment of God on that Holy Saturday.

---SILENCE---

Hear King David's cry of desolation as he felt abandoned by God--(Psalm 22:1-5).

While desolation is what Jesus experienced, in it God was most present. At the point of farthest separation, God on the throne in Heaven and God in the tomb descended into Hell, God is still one. Father and Son both experiencing the pain of the cross and the separation; their oneness maintained by the power of the Holy Spirit. In their separation and shared suffering they are closer than ever. Often it is in the silence of desolation we find that Love is most present. On Easter Sunday we see the proof. Holy Saturday is where we stand on the boundary of our desolation and the loving presence of God. Like Jesus, no matter what we feel or think, no matter our circumstances, nothing can separate us, His children, from the love of our Father (Romans 8:31-39). Nothing.

Thinking the Story

Jesus' Ministry

By now you may be saying, "Mike, this is all well and good, but what does it have to do with Chapter 23 of The Story, 'Jesus' Ministry Begins'?" In my mind it has everything to do with it. Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, this is the central story that tells us who God is. Paul tells the church of Corinth that it is of

first importance (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). It provides the lens through which to know the nature of God. Jesus said, "If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him, and have seen Him" (John 14:7). Jesus is God. His life tells us about God, in Jesus we see God up close, not the distant God of the Old Testament.

Jesus came to free slaves, give sight to the blind, release captives. How? In his fourth Servant Song, Isaiah describes the coming Jesus; God's suffering Servant, as a "Man of sorrows...despised and forsaken by men" (Isaiah 53:3). He goes on to tell us that God was "pleased to crush [Jesus] and put Him to grief" (Isaiah 53:10). That makes no sense to us until we also read that Jesus "endured the cross with joy, despising its shame" (Hebrews 12:2). He emptied Himself (Philippians 2:7), coming as a truth-telling, suffering servant whom it pleased His Father to crush. This is the unconditional love between Father and Son directed toward us that is a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles (1 Corinthians 1:18-25).

God, then, in Jesus, enters the lower story with us to bring new meaning to our story and to invite us even deeper into our own story. Death, burial, and resurrection--only from the perspective of Holy Saturday, on the day after the end of life (Good Friday) and the day before the end of death (Easter Sunday), are we finally ready to begin talking about and marveling at the ministry of Jesus. Only from here can we begin to understand why the Messiah King would enter Jerusalem riding a lowly donkey. Only from here can we begin to understand Jesus' ministry.

Our Ministry

We are each called to be witnesses, martyrs for Christ: "You shall be my witnesses" says Jesus (Acts 1:7-8). "How are we to do that?", we might ask. Jesus tells us. In his final moments with the disciples before He was taken by the mob, Jesus prayed this to His Father for us: As You [Father] sent Me into the world, I have also sent them [us] into the world (John 17:18).

"As You sent Me," says Jesus. Jesus says, I am the way and the truth and the life...(John 14:6). As Father sent Son, so Jesus sends us; Jesus' way becomes our way, Jesus' ministry becomes our ministry. Therefore, we are suffering servants with Christ, of whom our Father may be pleased to crush for His glory and the redemption of the lost. Will we respond in joy as Jesus did? And I wonder if this isn't the challenge God is setting before us, to live on the boundary between the end of life and the end of death, to experience and acknowledge our doubt, despair, and desolation as we cling to the faith, hope, and love we have in Christ.

Living the Story

Our Lives as Witnesses for Jesus--followers of The Way

In the earliest church, we were called "followers of The Way" (Acts 24:14). The term "Christian" was used derogatorily, meaning "Messiah's boys."

The Jesus way is not a happy message of simple optimism that if we follow Jesus life will turn out okay as we measure it against the American Dream. But it is the message of deep hope when viewed backward and forward from Holy Saturday. It is from Holy Saturday that the shallow optimism that comes from racing from Good Friday to Easter Sunday and leads us to helplessness and powerlessness in the world and in our own lives turns into the power of real hope. On Holy Saturday we honestly acknowledge our pain on one side and resurrection on the other. Out of our doubt, despair, and desolation we find ultimate faith, hope, and love leading to real power in the Spirit.

Closing

So we go into our families, our churches, our workplaces "as" Jesus went. And it is not easy. Next week Dave will talk about the Sermon on the Mount. In it, Jesus says, "Don't be angry in unrighteousness," "don't divorce," "stick to your word," "turn the other cheek," "give to those who sue you," "go the extra

mile," and "love your enemies." Did He really mean it? Isn't there a chance I'll be taken advantage of? Yes and yes. It is the Jesus way.

From Without

We will be taken advantage of from without. There are movements in our country today that attack with power: Planned Parenthood and the gay rights movements are two prominent examples. Often their tactics are threats and intimidation. Sadly, some who say they follow Christ respond in kind. But, this is not the Jesus way. We speak truth and we respond with love and grace. Likely, we will be steamrolled. But, from the tomb on Holy Saturday we know that love wins and evil is defeated, even if not in our lifetime. This is the ministry, the way of Christ.

From Within

And like King David's lament earlier (Psalm 55) and Jesus' death at the hands of religious leaders, some of the attacks will come from within. Our children may become prodigals, but we continue to love them. Family members may ridicule us for our faith, but we continue to love them. Christian friends may hurt us, but we continue to love them. This is the view from Holy Saturday. The power of love comes from its willingness to absorb the fury of evil until, seemingly defeated, love arises with power. This is the blood of the martyrs: strength from weakness; life from death.

From Ourselves

Finally, we have our own crosses to bear, our own sin in which we experience doubt, despair, and desolation finding, finally, that we can only turn to Christ for His faith, hope, and love.

This is the ministry of Christ and is what it means to join the ministry of Christ: to go "as" Christ, the Suffering Servant, who for the joy set before Him endured the humiliation of the Cross, for God so loved the world...you and me.

Sorrow of the World

And it is not just the attacks to which we respond in love. We must also suffer with Christ as we watch those in the world suffer, Nigeria, Somalia, Afghanistan...we watch our family and friends suffer...and we ourselves suffer pain and despair, and we cry, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken us?"

Psalm 13

Here is another Psalm of King David--(Psalm 13). You hear his doubt, despair, and desolation turning to faith, hope, and love. But even King David, the apple of God's eye, the man after God's own heart could not skip directly to the end of the Psalm. From our doubt, despair, and desolation we find genuine faith, hope, and love.

So, dare with me to live in the boundary, in Holy Saturday. We cannot be effective ministers with Christ unless, like Him, we dwell in Holy Saturday, the place in which we are fully aware of our own doubt, despair, and desolation and have received the faith, hope, and love offered by Jesus; only then are we able to be a minister to a world being overcome with doubt, despair, and desolation and to freely offer them what we have been freely given (Matthew 10:8).

Offering

Benediction

Will you leave me also?—John 6:67
Choice—set our face (Isaiah 50:7; Luke 9:51-59), or not