

The Scoffers And Religious Elite

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[0 : 00] Good morning. Today's scripture reading is taken from the book of Mark, chapter 15, verses 21 through 34.

A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross.

They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha, which means the place of the skull. Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it, and they crucified him.

Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get. It was nine in the morning when they crucified him. The written notice of the charge against him read, The King of the Jews.

They crucified two rebels with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, So, you who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself.

[1 : 06] In the same way, the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. He saved others, they said, but he can't save himself. Let this Messiah, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.

Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him. At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.

And at three in the afternoon, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, Elah, Elah, Lama, Sabah Shani, which means, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

This is the word of our Lord. Don't worry, Amy, you got it right. Yeah, not too many people do good with that Aramaic, right?

So, let's pray together. Almighty and gracious God, we thank you for the gift it is to be able to worship together. We are grateful for this moment and this time as we have opened our hearts to you in praise and in song.

[2 : 14] And Lord, we pray now that you continue to move among us. Plant a seed in each of us that will grow. Grow and bear fruit for the honor and glory of your name. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, we pray.

Amen. So, here we are on the first Sunday of Lent, as you heard me say during the greeting. And we are talking about being witnesses at the cross. Witnesses at the cross, right?

And so, this series is inspired by a book by a Bible scholar who teaches at Vanderbilt University. And that book is called Witness at the Cross as well. We're using it for our Bible study during Lent.

So, if you're interested in talking about that some more, just see me after service or send us a message if you're with us online and we can talk about what that book is. Now, that said, today we're going to walk through the point of view of people who are in the crowd mocking Jesus.

So, to help us understand why that would even be relevant to us, I want to ask you a very simple question. Because I'm willing to bet I'm not alone in this.

[3 : 19] Did you have anybody get under your skin this week? Somebody who said something, did something, and it really stuck in your throat a little bit?

Kind of just hit you in the pit of the gut? And you, let's just say we're thinking some not Jesus thoughts about them. Yes. Come on, y'all. We're honest with each other.

I see I'm not alone, which is reassuring. Yeah, it happens, doesn't it? That it can come from any kind of place. Sometimes people will just do things that are mean-spirited.

Sometimes people will do things that are insensitive. Sometimes people will get into this place where they actually want you to feel a little bit of extra pain. They want to rub it in a little bit if somehow they got you or they know they got to you.

And they want you to sit in there for a little bit. They want you to know that they won and want to make sure you appreciate the fact that they won or at least how they feel about the moment.

[4 : 25] Something very human about that. And that's part of our challenge because we do this to one another. That when these opportunities show up, there's that little piece in the back of our brain that wants to make sure that we take a little extra, if not a whole pound of flesh, at least a scoop or two with us.

And while we hate it when it happens, we'd be dishonest with ourselves if we said we've probably never done it either. But that's why we want to spend some time talking about this crowd.

Because if we think that we are beyond that, that we would never actually behave in this way, and if we think we would certainly never behave this way toward Christ, then we got some challenges that we got to look directly in the face.

Now let's talk about how we got to this moment. Most of you, having been in church for a while, are familiar with the story of the crucifixion. We know about the Last Supper.

We know about the trials. We know about the physical suffering that Jesus goes through. And then we come to this moment. Jesus is led out of town, carrying this big cross beam.

[5 : 48] And then he gets to the place where there's a pike driven into the ground. He's nailed to the cross beam, lifted up on it, set in place, and then they nail his feet, or most likely his ankles, to the pike in the ground.

That's what crucifixion is. And that horrible physical experience is what he's experiencing now. Let's not forget, he's been beaten multiple times before this happens.

And there he is. Now, what we have here is that there's two sets of voices that we want to pay attention to. There's a crowd of people, and then there's this group of religious leaders that's also there.

Let's talk about the crowd first, because these are everyday folks. Now, realistically, there would have been a crowd at this crucifixion. Because of who was being crucified, people were able to be at crucifixions.

I mean, they were public events. They happened in public, usually on a road, a pretty major thoroughfare, because the Romans wanted the nation of Israel to see people get crucified as a message of terror.

[7 : 10] In other words, if you step out of line, we'll do this to you too. So they wanted them to see people get crucified. There was also this piece of humiliating the person that gets crucified, hence our conversation today.

That if you stepped out of line, and if you had done the wrong thing, people took pleasure in making sure they rubbed it in a little bit for you. Today's crucifixion is kind of different because of the person who's being crucified, though.

We can tell that by what's said to him. Right? So we get this from Mark, that as people are either headed down the road or they're standing around, they say, hey, weren't you the guy who said that if we tore down the temple, you would raise it back up again in three days?

That means people were paying attention to what he said. So they had to know who he was. And to see him in that moment, suffering this most humiliating death, suffering in all that pain, somebody wants to make sure that he feels it on the emotional level as well as on the physical level.

That he's lost. That he's defeated. And the folks down around the crowd, those who don't love him, those who don't believe him, are making sure they send that message.

[8 : 44] The religious leaders are in a different kind of camp, though. Because it would have been kind of unusual to have religious leaders show up at one of these things. I mean, when you consider the role they played and the number of people who got crucified, it would have been kind of unusual to have people who were higher ups in the temple show up at a crucifixion.

But they were kind of invested in this one. And so there they are. Not only are they there because of this guy, but they too want to send a message to him and to everybody else watching.

He saved others, but he can't save himself. You heard Amy read that. And then there's that piece of, if you are who you say you are, if this is the Christ, let him come down, then we'll believe.

So we're in this weird place of embarrassing him. Not only is he in agony, because crucifixion was about agony.

It was about how much pain can you be there for. How much pain can you endure. And endure it for a long time. It's interesting that the gospel writers don't spend a lot of time on the nature of crucifixion, which is probably a good thing.

[10 : 04] Because crucifixion is awful. It was built to be awful. People could stay on those crosses with nails in those joints, literally for days. That when nails would pierce those particular pieces, they would pierce nerves, and your body would be in extreme pain, leading to medical shock and all kinds of other things.

They made up new words for it, hence excruciate. Think about that. Okay? That's what we're dealing with. So that, the Bible writers, the gospel writers, skip past.

But they focus on this idea of people showing up to rub it in. And why would we do that?

Why would you think that people whose job it is to talk about the God who made us all, the God who gave us these great laws for holiness, they would want to make sure that they showed up to embarrass him?

Friends, that happens because he got under their skin. He was a challenge to them. Because he made them have to confront the fact that maybe the way they were teaching about God wasn't working.

[11 : 34] Maybe some of what they were saying about God wasn't actually what God wanted. And when they saw that people were responding to it, when he did the extraordinary things he did, and they certainly couldn't explain them away and they couldn't write them off, he got to them.

And so now to see him in this moment, they're going to take a little pleasure in that. They're going to make sure that he and the people know who won.

We get that part of the story for the most part. But friends, we would be doing ourselves a disservice if we just wanted to look at the religious elite, if we wanted to just look at the passers-by and think, tsk, tsk, tsk.

Y'all know we do that sort of thing. It's easy to look at the people who get it wrong in Scripture and go, they shouldn't have done that. But friends, remember, their story is our story.

If you think that you might not have chimed in on that side of the crowd, then we need to look in the mirror a little bit.

[12 : 51] Clearly there are other people in the crowd. I mean, there are the people who love him. All the gospel writers let us know that some of the women who took care of Jesus and the disciples were clearly there. Most of the 12 had disappeared.

And there's reasons for that. Some valid, some are just about being afraid. But they aren't recorded as being there. But then there's this group.

This group that we're talking about. This group that probably would include us. And here's why I'm willing to bet it would include us.

One thing that pastors like to do, I certainly experienced this a lot growing up, is that we talk about this journey of Holy Week. So let's go back to Palm Sunday.

Jesus shows up in town. And what's everybody doing then? Y'all know the answer? What's everybody doing then when Jesus shows up in town? We're waving the palms. Everybody's happy to see him. It's a celebration.

[13 : 53] It's a parade. It's all good. Because he's Jesus. And he's going to do cool things for us. We've heard he does all these great miracles. And he's teaching us these great things.

And then we get to Friday. But let's talk about our Palm Sunday moments. See, our Palm Sunday moments happen when we realize there's a truth of God in our lives.

And we love that truth. We welcome that truth. And we say, thank you, Jesus. We bring it from the gut because we mean it. Because Jesus has told us, you are forgiven.

You've been set free. God loves you no matter what. When we're all over that. We just want to drink it all up because we're not feeling in that great place. Or Jesus has done something amazing in our lives.

There was this illness and now we're better. We had this problem and now it's solved. Et cetera, et cetera. We're all over it. But then Jesus does what Jesus tends to do.

[14 : 57] Which is he keeps teaching and telling us the truth. And eventually Jesus hits a truth that we don't like as much. Jesus calls out something in our behavior that's not okay with us.

Or we did have a different kind of problem. And Jesus didn't solve it the way we hoped he would solve it. And because Jesus says something like, well, I was hungry and you didn't give me something to eat.

And I was thirsty and you didn't give me anything to drink. And I was naked and you didn't give me clothes. And because you made choices like that, when I do come back and separate, as he put it, the sheep from the goats, you know what the answer to that story is.

And we know we've made choices like that. Jesus will come to us and say, well, if your right eye offends you, pluck it out.

Or if your right hand offends you, cut it off. It's better for you to go into the kingdom without that hand than it is to be whole and go into hell.

[16 : 19] But there's that thing that our right hand is doing that we don't want to give up. Jesus says things like, love your enemies.

Do good to those who persecute you. And if you think that we always love our enemies, check how we started this conversation. So where does that leave us?

That leaves us in this place that when Jesus starts getting to us, in other words, he gets under our skin. Then all of a sudden, that Friday crowd shows up.

The one that says, he's a false prophet. Crucify him. And like we said, we can look at the folk who actually did it.

But let's not pretend that we don't have our moments of doing exactly the same thing. And when we get through that problem or when that temptation shows up and we commit the sin, but we don't get struck by lightning and we look at our lives and our lives continue to keep on cruising kind of the way we expected them to keep on cruising.

[17 : 48] And we go, well, maybe he didn't mean that. Or maybe that's not such a bad thing. Or maybe it's okay. It's a different way of saying, well, you who thought you could destroy the temple.

Or if you are who you say you are. It's the same thing. Our challenge then is to confront that in ourselves.

Our challenge then is to make sure that if Jesus is saying those hard things, that we hear him, that we listen to him, that we don't turn into the people who mock him and scoff at him or people who just want him when we want him and then want to turn our back when we don't.

That's how we have to change this. You see, because we can join into that crowd and in fact, we can see Jesus in a moment of vulnerability.

That he will cry out because he's abandoned and he's alone. Eloi, Eloi, lama sabaksani.

[19 : 10] My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And we, who are not paying attention, think we might have gotten him.

That he's kind of where we want him. He is alone. He is humiliated. He is embarrassed. But Jesus is Jesus.

And even the religious elite who were listening to him, they may have thought that for a minute, but the religious elite should have caught something pretty important in that moment.

And I'm hoping that you hear it too. What most folks believe is not that Jesus was crying out because he was feeling defeated.

That Jesus was actually reciting the first verse of a song. And it speaks to that feeling. It speaks to a person who feels alone and abandoned.

[20 : 11] It's Psalm 22. And so both things can be true. He can be feeling those feelings. But think about who Jesus is. Jesus goes to the word in that weakness.

We see Jesus go to the word all the time. When Jesus is tempted by Satan in the wilderness, what does he do? He quotes scripture back to him. When Jesus is asked, what's the greatest commandment?

What does he do? He quotes scripture back as the answer. Jesus goes to the word constantly. But here's the thing, especially for that religious elite, is that if you know how the psalm begins, because it begins like this.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me? So far from my cries of anguish. My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer.

By night, but I find no rest. That's how it starts. But what happens as the psalm progresses, is it shows that the person, the voice that's speaking, trusts that God is going to save them.

[21 : 35] Trusts that God is hearing their cries, and when they do, they will be saved. And here's how the psalm ends. I will declare your name to your people.

In the assembly, I will praise you. You who fear the Lord, praise him. All you descendants of Jacob, honor him. Revere him, all you descendants of Israel.

For he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one. He has not hidden his face from him, but has listened to his cry for help.

From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly. Before those who fear you, I will fulfill my vows. The poor will eat and be satisfied.

Those who seek the Lord will praise him. May your hearts live forever. All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord.

[22 : 42] And all the families of the nations will bow down before him. For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations.

All the rich of the earth will feast and worship. All who go down to the dust will kneel before him. Those who cannot keep themselves alive posterity will serve him.

Future generations will be told about the Lord. They will proclaim his righteousness, declaring to a people yet unborn, he has done it.

That's how the psalm ends. Do you think that Jesus knew the first line and didn't know the last line? So what message do you think he's actually sending from the cross?

He may feel those things, but in feeling those things, where does it take him? To the truth of who God is.

[23 : 55] to the victory that is coming, even in this moment. Friends, as you consider that, if you find yourself among the mockers and scoffers from time to time, I want you to remember something about our Lord.

Not only that that's who he is, but remember what else he does, even while he's there. to the people who are mocking and laughing, people who are taking pleasure in the cruelty that is crucifixion, what's the first thing he says to them?

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. As one person on his side is screaming about how insulting and trying to humiliate him, when he hears someone say, remember me, what does he say to them?

Today, you will be with me in paradise. And as he lays down his life, what does he remind us all?

It is accomplished. It is accomplished. The mission of redemption and salvation, salvation, the bringing of the truth to a world who doesn't understand it, the lived example of love that reaches deeper than any of us could ever have possibly imagined.

[25 : 30] It is accomplished. That is who he is. And even in the ways in which you might make choices that mock him, that disobey him, that forget who he is and what he's done for you, that is who he is to you.

Let that sink in and let it change your heart. Not harden your heart, but change your heart because you are loved, like that, even in that moment, even when you mock him.

That is who he is. Be a witness to that Jesus in your life. Amen and amen.

Loving God, we thank you that you show us love so far beyond our understanding that in your agony and in your pain, that even in the face of our disobedience, even in the face of our turning our back, not even turning our back, but turning towards you and laughing and mocking, saying that you clearly didn't mean what you said, or clearly this doesn't matter to you.

Help us to remember who you are, that even in these moments you show grace, even in these moments you show love and forgiveness.

[27 : 14] Lord, as we come to you today, knowing that we have turned our back on you from time to time, let us go into this world and bear witness to who you are.

Bear witness to a God who has loved us, yes, even us who have laughed and mocked him, loved us so much that he has paid the penalty, that he has forgiven us, that he has loved us still and set us back on the path.

That is what we bear witness to today. That is who we bear witness to today. May it be so. Amen.

Indeed, we know our Lord is holy. Indeed, we know our Lord is moving among us and moving powerfully among us. Let our eyes be opened as we see him, even as he suffers and certainly in his glory.

As we think about ways in which we will live into our faith this week, we have a whole lot happening at the church. I want to draw your attention specifically to some Easter things. We have an Easter candy sale that is explained in your bulletin as well.

[28 : 25] That has a deadline coming up pretty quickly, so you want to make sure that if you do want some Easter candy, you get that in. Easter flower orders are also coming in, and because everything is earlier this year, you want to pay attention to the date and you want to have those in as well.

Then there's our church Easter celebration for the kids, the Easter acorn, etc., which is going to be on the 23rd, I forget which day, it's in there. That's why you rely on that, not me.

That being said, you make sure you have that marked on your calendar. We also want to talk about fish fry sign-up and our need to do more people. We've celebrated today in prayer the ways in which we've stepped into this as a church community.

We need to keep doing that. Mary highlighted for us that we do have some specific needs for next week. We need more cooks, we need more people to work the pie cart, we need more people on cleanup, both the leftover cleanup as well as the dining hall cleanup, and of course we need more desserts made.

We were almost at dessert crisis point this week. So if you are able to make a dessert, please contribute that as well. All the sign-ups are still available, so please make sure your name gets on the list.

[29 : 38] That's one of the reasons for this, is sometimes folks will just do it, but they don't tell us they're going to do it, which leaves us worried if we have enough. So please make sure that you sign up so we know where we accurately stand.

All that having been shared, let us receive our benediction. Lord God, we know that you will get into our hearts and under our skin, but it is in a good way, in a way that is for our benefit, a way that will help us draw even closer to you.

So Lord, we thank you that you push us. We thank you that sometimes it stings, but you are drawing us closer to you. Let us go into the world and bear witness to the love and the grace that draws us ever closer.

now in the name of God, our creator and king, in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and our savior, and in the name of the Holy Spirit, our comforter and our sustainer.

May God bless us now as we leave to love and serve God and all God's children and all God's people said, Amen.