

For the next week, we will retell some profound and emotional family stories. These stories serve as the foundation of our Christian identity. We embody all of the stories of salvation history, whether good, bad, or ugly. They are part of us and we are part of them. And we continue to bear witness to these stories for those who are yet to come. We are called to embrace them, own them, share them, and learn from them. To say that they are merely a recollection of events would be to unravel the cloth of Christianity because each of us has been chosen by God to be woven into the fabric of His plan of salvation.

Our stories for this Holy Week begin with Jesus joining the Jewish Passover attendees as they entered the Holy City of Jerusalem for the festivities. The crowds waved palm branches and raised their voices in praise. “Hosana in the Highest!” They celebrated how God liberated them from Egypt and established them as a nation. There was much for which to rejoice! “Hosana in the Highest!”

Yet, they remained under the cloud of Roman occupation and were looking to again be liberated. Their independence as a nation had been replaced by subservience. Their God-given identity was in peril, and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had been diluted in the pool of Roman idols.

In that difficult period, they heard Jesus spread a message of hope. He was a miracle-worker, a Messiah, one who had power over evil, and even over nature. He was a voice of liberation, hope, and love. He promised justice and peace.

This Messiah did not condemn, but corrected, forgave and healed. Yet, not all saw him in this light. Some considered Jesus to be a threat. They saw him as a problem that needed to be solved. Soon we will recall how the voice of hope, peace, forgiveness, and love would be silenced.

As we walk with Jesus and crowds into Jerusalem, we can celebrate with them. We can rejoice in God's work in salvation.

There is a sober and contemplative ambience when taking an early morning walk down the cobbled, rugged, and narrow streets on the Via Dolorosa in the old city of Jerusalem. Via Dolorosa is commemorated to be the route that Jesus took to his place of execution. As the world wakes up, those same streets fill with people – citizens, visitors, and tourists. The hustle and bustle of the day commences. Shopkeepers fling their doors open to display their wares. Aggressive sales people are in your face. Prospective buyers haggle to get the best deal.

I suspect that today's middle eastern culture is similar to the middle eastern culture of biblical times.

We pick up our story of salvation where we left off, - we were entering Jerusalem for the Passover festivities. Preparations were at their peak. It was a big deal! Jerusalem would have been abuzz with activity. Pontius Pilate would have been in town to keep an eye on things. Having too many Jews in one place was not considered to be a good thing. Any sign of civil unrest would result in a swift and severe Roman response.

There was this nagging situation. This Jesus character was a problem that needed to be solved! He was causing too much commotion. Jewish leadership was worried about their image, and jealous about Jesus' notoriety. He was a threat.

So, they handed Jesus over to the Roman officials and demand that he be executed by crucifixion. Crucifixion was a punishment that was carried out

outside of the city gates. It put the criminal on display, and stripped him of all dignity, honor, and value. It was a gruesome, agonizing, humiliating, death. It was so abhorrent and cruel that Romans did not crucify other Romans.

Biblical tradition tells us about a brutalized, bloodied, and humiliated Jesus carrying his cross through the streets of Jerusalem, lined with weeping faithful – solemn and emotional. But I suggest that while this is true, I also believe that the streets would have been filling with Passover patrons, shopping and preparing for the holy day festivities. Hustle and bustle. Shopkeepers pushing their products. Customers haggling for the best deal! Having a bloodied criminal work his way through the crowds would have been considered a nuisance – **a problem**. There was Jesus, beaten, humiliated, and abandoned – dragging the tool of his execution through the rugged streets of Jerusalem – stumbling and falling – leaving a trail of blood. Onlookers would have jeered at him and spit at him. To his misfortune, Simon of Cyrene was coerced into involuntary assistance. Jesus' closest friends watched from a distance.

There - Mounted, and on display, stripped of all dignity, with spikes brutally driven through his wrists and feet, and streams of life-sustaining blood flowing from the gaping holes torn in his flesh, hung the body of Jesus. His followers, absent. Forsaken by God, his Father. Mocked. Alone. Empty.

But, what did it matter? He did not fit the vision of a Messiah. He was a problem. After all, he did not raise up armies and restore the kingdom of Israel to its former glory. Obviously, he was nothing more than another Messiah wannabe. A failure.

There hung the criminal who did not come to condemn the world, but to save it.

There hung the criminal who promised to intercede for us, to make us worthy - to redeem us.

There hung the criminal who shed his blood in the New Covenant, to intercede for us, for the forgiveness of sins.

There hung the criminal who had the audacity to be faithful to us, to love us.

And there hung the criminal – over there - at a distance.

There! Problem solved!

This is the backdrop of our story as we enter into Holy Week. Earlier, we entered Jerusalem in celebration. But now, we will retell this story – our story – once again. I invite you to imagine yourself in it and ask yourself where you would have been standing when Jesus, our Messiah, the Son of God, breathed his last.