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April 9, 2017
Palm Sunday
Passion Gospel, Matthew

May His Blood Be Upon Me

Really, I don't mind being emotionally manipulated. It can actually be pleasurable – you know, Aristotelian pity, fear, catharsis. That's what art is – emotional manipulation. If it's good, it's manipulative, but, you know, in a good way. This Palm Sunday ritual we do of reading aloud, acting out the Passion – story of Jesus' betrayal, arrest, abandonment, trial, and ultimately his horrible death – I've found to be emotionally manipulative in a not good way.

I've spent most of my preaching on it trying to undo some of that manipulation. The idea is, it seems to me, that we (but mostly you, not me or Michele, because we orchestrated this whole thing; we gave you the lines to read) are at first a crowd excited that Jesus has come to town. We are supportive and happy because we've heard about all the wonderful things Jesus has been doing. And we act out that scene for maybe 5 minutes. And then we turn on Jesus. We suddenly like this Jesus Barabbas character a lot more. As for Jesus, we scream for his death: "Crucify him! Crucify him!" "Are you sure?" asks Pilate. "Yup!" say the people of St. Mark's. "May his blood be upon us and upon our children," which is a weird thing to say.

I don't like this kind of manipulation, because I think there's an ulterior motive going on here. Maybe, just maybe there is a shady reason behind an effort to get you all to feel guilty for something you can never fix. Years and years ago I read this profile of George Meyer, one of the early writers for the Simpsons. This detail of his childhood stuck in my head:

People talk about how horrible it is to be brought up Catholic, and it's all true. The main thing was that there was no sense of proportion. I would chew a piece of gum at school, and the nun would say, 'Jesus is very angry with you about that,' and on the wall behind her would be a

dying, bleeding guy on a cross. That's a horrifying image to throw at a little kid. You really could almost think that your talking in line, say, was on a par with killing Jesus. You weren't sure, and there was never a moderating voice."¹

A moderating voice is what this passion narrative needs. Couldn't there have been some people in the crowd with the palms who still loved and supported him a few days later, but were drowned out by louder voices? And no one ever really said, "may his blood be upon us and our children." Whoever wrote that was looking for some children to blame and they didn't have to go far. I spoke last week about the long legacy of anti-Semitism associated with the gospels of John and Matthew especially. We can't hear that sentence and not think of our history of blaming Jews for Christ's death.

We sing "Were you there when they crucified my lord?" Well I know who wasn't there: you or me.

This story has been used to manipulate, control, foster division and hatred; it's been the starting point for pogroms. This story is like a grenade and we tend to toss it at the nearest group of possible scapegoats or let it explode in our hands destroying our own sense of self worth.

But, with that said, it's not enough for me to just disarm the grenade and put it away. I can't, for one thing. It's just too powerful and in this (for now) majority Christian nation, it's just too pervasive. It's also the story of our most holy of weeks; it's the climax of all of the narratives that form the sacred story of our people.

It's very, very tricky to deconstruct the ways this gospel has been used as a weapon against us and against others and then construct a way that we might be convicted by it.

¹ <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2000/03/13/taking-humor-seriously>

This movie, *Get Out*, a new horror film, directed by the comedian Jordan Peele raised some tough questions for me². It's not really a spoiler to say that white people are the villains in the movie. And it's not really a spoiler to say that Jordan Peele meant the movie to be a metaphor for the experience black people have all the time, just walking around being themselves. The spoiler is that there are no good white people in the movie, no white savior. A bigger spoiler is that a young, attractive, white woman is a main villain. The implication is, based on what Peele has said about his work, is that white women are the villains in the lives of black people all the time. They seem like supporters or like they might be kind or harmless, but then they tend to center themselves or play the victim.

The villainy of white women isn't just in current cinema. The world recently learned that Carolyn Bryant lied. She was the woman who accused 14 year old Emmett Till of whistling at her, an accusation that led to his brutal torture and murder – a Christ-like figure if ever there was one.

I recently learned, and this was shocking to me -I had a picture of Sojourner Truth hanging on my bedroom wall as a teenager – that the suffragettes were raging racists. They advocated lynching, they leveraged racial hatred to protest African American enfranchisement because they believed it would advance their cause. They played upon the myth of the white woman in danger from the black man. These were my heroes: Susan Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, among others³.

² There's a lot of commentary out there about this film, but here's one place to start:

https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/16/movies/jordan-peeel-interview-get-out.html?_r=0

³ <http://www.npr.org/2011/03/25/134849480/the-root-how-racism-tainted-womens-suffrage>
<http://www.wesleyan.edu/mlk/posters/suffrage.html>

<http://www.racismreview.com/blog/2014/02/18/trouble-with-white-feminism/> (unfortunately, the evidence for many of the white suffragettes commitment to female suffrage before black suffrage is all too easy to find).

Obviously I don't advocate lynching or depriving the franchise from any group of people. I try my best, as far as I can tell, to move in the world without being awful. But, as a white woman, I know the way I can use how non-threatening I am to benefit myself. I know how precious my safety is to just about everybody. I know that my ideas of beauty and ideas of pretty much everyone are based on my skin tone, my blonde hair, my blue eyes. Basically, Jordan Peele, and a whole lot of other people, are saying, "you are the real life version of Freddy Kreuger for me."

If the legacy of white womanhood is not some authentic version of "may his blood be upon us and upon our children" I don't know what it. For the most part, and I generalize here, we southerners think about this stuff. It's because of all the Faulkner we have to read and the past not being dead; it's not even past.

The problem gets worse when I try to make it better, to fix it. I risk centering myself once again in a story where I am not the hero and, on the other hand, I risk deflecting blame onto some other group, people who are doing it worse than I am.

It's true for all of us, when we're caught in the snare of our complicity in whatever kind of suffering we cause others. We move to justify ourselves, but then only find ourselves as the ones pointing the finger at some other group who is responsible. "You killed Jesus!"

There is no one point to this story, if there were we wouldn't have to keep reading it. But one point is that we tend to use what tools we have to create groups of insiders and outsiders and powerful and powerless. And just when we've dismantled one set of powerful ones, we set another up in its place.

Perhaps the lesson from this point is for us to hold still in front of the story. Do not move to justify or to blame or to absolve. Stand still before the cross which is a symbol that says many things, but certainly this: God is firmly planted in our lives and is committed to all of it. All of it; the disappointed hopes, the betrayals, the crushing loss. The incarnate God goes to the end with us. Not because God has to, but because of God's inexhaustible love for us.