

Sermon Text for November 9, 2014

by Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Isaiah 53, Matthew 27:2,26,50,57-61

“Murphy’s Law”

Well, if last week we found ourselves in Christmas with the birth of Jesus to father Holy Spirit and mother Mary, what church season do we find ourselves in this week? With the words from the Apostles’ Creed today: suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified dead and buried? That is right, lent. We go from looking at details of Christ’s birth which grounds him as 100% human and 100% God to this week his suffering, crucifixion, death and burial which makes him a vulnerable, and maybe even according to human terms, weak person.

This past week social media was enamored with Brittany Maynard who followed through on her right to die and took her life legally in Oregon before having to face the inevitable and irreversible effects of a cancerous brain tumor. The right to die. We all have the right to die, we all have the inevitability to die. But as Christians we see death as a result of a curse of sin, not an inevitability planned by God and certainly not chosen by us. God always has the last word and can bring life out of death at any moment of our journey.

But suffering is not a necessity like death. We all have to die, but do we all have to suffer? Did Jesus have to suffer and then did he also have to die? Was it just a case of inevitability, since we all have to go down that road, or was it Murphy’s Law. You know Murphy’s Law which states that whatever can go wrong will go wrong. Was it just a matter of Jesus finding himself at the wrong place at the wrong time and once the people started to turn on him everything went wrong and he ended up on the cross?

When I say we believe we are essentially saying that what comes next is not a matter of chance or luck but rather a matter of providence, of God making it happen. As soon as you mix belief and faith into the matter, then you must believe that God is involved in an active way. God wills it to happen. This is the case of Jesus’ suffering and death. Now in the Apostles’ Creed there are only 3 people who are mentioned by name. Who are they? Jesus the Christ, Mary the virgin, and Pontius Pilate. Which of these three seems a little out of place? Which one of these is the square peg in a round hole?

Pilate is mentioned in order to ground the Creed and the statements that follow in history. There are no historical documents on Mary outside of Scripture. Jesus has his

name mentioned a few times here and there outside of Scripture. But Pilate we know a lot about from Josephus and others who tell us much about him historically. We know he ruled from 26-36, he had a wife, he had a penchant for killing Jews, many times for no reason at all and it was done in a very cruel fashion. The name Pontius Pilate is someone that all people, whether they are Christians or not, can agree that he actually existed that we have some historical facts about him outside of the Gospels. He is someone who would have not qualms about whipping, crucifying to the death a man name Jesus.

Now I only read a few verses in the Gospel about Pilate, but if you look at all of chapter 27 you have to ask yourself if Pilate was a villain or a saint. After all he said he found Jesus innocent, he tried to set him free but the mob wanted Barabbas. He said that he washed his hands of the whole affair, meaning he presumed that Jesus was innocent. In fact the Coptic Church in Egypt understands that after the crucifixion Pilate becomes a Christian and becomes a disciple. This church has even made Pilate a Saint in their church.

Matthew tries to draw all of the blame for the crucifixion of Christ and place it solely on what group? The crowd who shouts: "Let his blood be on us and our descendants." But the Apostles' Creed gives us another picture, a much more accurate one if you look at history, and the blame is placed squarely upon the shoulders of Pilate for the suffering, crucifixion, death, and burial of the Christ.

When we look at the second phrase, crucifixion, you must know that there was no worse method to die both physically and culturally. Physically it was excruciating pain. It was torture. Socially according to the Jewish custom we read in Deuteronomy 21:23 that anyone put to death by crucifixion "is under God's curse." Did you catch that? Jesus our Lord and Savior died in such a way that according to Jewish law he was considered to be under God's curse.

When Jesus dies on the cross the Scripture in Matthew states that Jesus cried with a loud voice and gave up his spirit. The word for spirit is pneuma, which is the same word used for Holy Spirit, or as we used to say Holy Ghost. So here Jesus is literally giving up the ghost. This is where that phrase comes from. But look at the manner in which he died. This is not a typical martyrs death. Isaiah 53 gives us a picture of one who is docile while being led to the slaughter. In many stories of martyrs we see them defiant or ending their lives with rousing speeches. Think of Stephen as he lambasts the

religious leaders and then he sees a vision and states: “Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” It is only after that heroic statement that he is stoned and killed. Now that is martyrdom. Jesus’ last words were: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Finally Jesus was buried as Isaiah 53:9 states in the tomb of a rich man. The women were looking on, almost as a foreshadowing of the resurrection that they would be the first witnesses to and be able to testify and bear witness to that resurrection. But the burial of Jesus in Matthew leaves us with a sense of finality, an underscoring of the fact that it is indeed finished.

Why did this all have to happen and what do we believe about his suffering, crucifixion, death, and burial? Was it just a case of Murphy’s Law that night when his disciples fell asleep they weren’t able to defend Jesus from the Roman soldiers. Did things go wrong in the questioning that Pilate had to whip Jesus. Did things go wrong when Pilate thought that he could release Jesus but the crowd chose Barabbas? Did things happen to go wrong with Jesus on the cross because he died sooner than any of the other three. Did things go wrong, as badly as possible, did everything that could go wrong actually go wrong when the guards were ordered to seal the tomb marking the end of Jesus’ life?

Or did things go just as God had planned. Was every single step which led to the tomb foreshadowed and spoken about so meticulously in Scripture and especially in Isaiah that if it had happened any other way it would not have been right. We hear in Scripture that a form of death had to be chosen so that he could free us both by transferring our condemnation onto him and by taking our guilt upon himself. His death holds a central place in God’s plan of salvation. Things went just as God had planned.

Jesus who was sinless is abandoned by God because he is giving his life as a ransom for sinners. Do you believe that? Every Sunday you say that you do. Separation from God is the price of sin. Jesus is paying that price by suffering under Pontius Pilate, by being crucified, by dying, and being buried once and for all. I Corinthians 15:3 tells us that Christ died for our sins not because Murphy’s Law came into effect but because it was according to the Scriptures that he would need to. It was all part of God’s plan.

Part of God’s plan. I can tell you that the disciples during the suffering and crucifixion, burial and death were not on the same page as God. They couldn’t see it as

part of God's plan. You know what I mean. We have all been through times of suffering and tragedy and there is nothing I can tell you from here that will put it in the context of God's plan that can be of help to you. In fact if I were to tell you that it is part of God's plan it would probably make you hardened and it could even cause you to set your face against the church and against your face. So, I'm not going to tell you, I'm going to let someone just like you, who sits in the pews just like you tell you about an experience in their life, a tragedy, a suffering, that they experienced and how they were able to taste God's grace even in the midst of it all.