

Sermon for Good Friday 2022

Church of St. Paul and the Redeemer

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Sometime late in the fourth century of our era, the soon-to-be-Emperor of Rome decided to become a Christian, likely for strategic reasons. He claimed he had a vision of the cross as he was about to enter a decisive battle. The vision's message: "In this sign you shall conquer." Constantine was impressed. So much so that we are told that he had the sign of the cross inscribed on every warrior's shield and raised the ensign of the cross to lead his troops into battle. And he won. Case closed.

I retell this story still reeling from the news that Kirill, the Orthodox Primate of All Russia, joins his former colleague in the KGB, Vladimir Putin, in declaring that the Russian invasion of Ukraine is a holy war, fought under the shadow of the cross to reestablish the apocalyptic vision of a restored Great Rus, the rest of the world be damned.

Cross and Empire. A murderous mixture.

Back to Constantine. As the story goes, Constantine had a very pious mother, named Helena. Both pious and shrewd, she too had a vision. Visions seemed to run in the family. She dreamed of a ruined execution ground outside of Jerusalem, a city the Roman occupiers long since had destroyed, and felt an irresistible urge to seek it out. As the Emperor's mother, she had the wherewithal to manage it. So she went, bringing with her soldiers and laborers to dig up the place she had seen in her dream. And there she found it—or at least pretended to find it. The story goes that her workmen, digging in that desolate ground, discovered pieces of the very cross that her son the Emperor had seen in his dream. She had recovered, she claimed, the wood of the true cross, discarded four hundred years before by the Roman legion that had overseen the execution of yet another Galilean subversive, Jesus called the Christ, the so-called King of the Jews and a suspected pretender to power.

And now, power seems to have won. Helena and Constantine, and later on those clergy higher-ups who batted off the Empire, insisted that the political power they had won was not theirs but the power of the crucified Jesus. Helena built a basilica on that spot, a basilica grand enough to be mistaken for an imperial palace. It was a palace that bespoke the glory of the risen Lord in the glory of Helena's son Constantine, the Christian heir of that long-ago Caesar in whose name the risen Lord had been put to death. Christianity became Christendom. The kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God were married in a new temple of Byzantine splendor. The tables had been turned, just as surely as Christ had overturned the tables of the moneychangers. Only this time, in the view of Constantine and his successors, the tables had been set upright.

Last evening, here in the church, we tried to turn the tables once again. That bare altar table, roughly washed in the final gesture of last night's ritual, was laid bare in anticipation of the emptiness of this day. And in a

moment, we will further seem to desecrate this sacred space by bringing in a roughhewn wooden cross, an object ugly, scarred, and barren.

That oversize cross will stand here only today, in keeping with ancient custom. The custom pays an ironic tribute to the dowager Empress Helena. Eighteen centuries ago, she had found a way to transform some decayed wooden fragments into a lasting emblem of state power. Religion became the business of the state. You might even say, with Helena's pious action, Pontius Pilate won. Or Putin did, with his puppet archbishop.

But today, we aim to reverse that victory, or at least make the attempt. The cross to be brought into this room is a sign that today, at St. Paul and the Redeemer, in Hyde Park and Kenwood, in Chicago, in the world where we live and move and breathe, business is not to be carried on as usual. For today at least, we claim that cross as an emblem not of power but of weakness, not of riches but of poverty. It is an emblem that speaks not of power, but of passion.

Passion. That's a funny word. When we use it at all, it usually describes a heated-up love affair, or a lust for excellence, or for power, or for profit. That's how Helena and Constantine might have understood it.

But today, in Year Three of the pandemic, and Week Six of the battle for Ukraine, the word passion takes on a different meaning. Its meaning is allied to words like patience, compassion, even passivity—passivity not in the sense of ignoring the world but of enduring it, receiving the world's blows as a way of shielding others, of shielding the vulnerable. That is the passion of Christ—a way of life that puts other people first, a way of dying that empowers those who are left behind, or bereft, or like the people of Mariupol, under siege.

That is the Good Friday gospel. That is the demand of this cross—the demand to live passionately and compassionately, whatever the cost. To do this is a struggle, I know. A struggle partly because, once this service is over, we will find a place to store this wooden cross for another year, safely hide it away. It's been three years since we last placed it in this room. Our sexton Lukasz had a hard time locating it. We will put it away again tomorrow morning and prepare this space for the glory of Easter. But let's keep track of where we stow it.

Pause here for the next hour or so. Let's ponder the true meaning of what on Easter Sunday we will call "Christ's victory over death." Not just today but every day, we must seek relics of the true cross—but a cross where not power but compassion is the true sign of victory. Every day we strain to find the scar of the cross. In a way, Good Friday makes that easy. Maybe that's why we call it good.

It must be admitted that the gospel passage we just heard so beautifully sung can give us pause. Perhaps John's passion gospel makes the struggle for true sight harder than it ought to be. For all its drama and its terror, John's account is the account of a witness at least partly convinced that Jesus was just going through the motions, dancing a choreography of suffering whose steps along the Via Dolorosa would lead inevitably to victory. In none of the other gospels—neither in Matthew, Mark, or Luke—is the figure of Christ so self-possessed

or is the narrator so sure that every action is a choice God makes so that everything in scripture might be fulfilled, every divine promise kept. In none of the other gospels are things so black and white. Nowhere else do we find those fellow citizens whom John insists on calling "the Jews" subject to such wholesale condemnation—to the kind of racist character blackening that has haunted Christian attitudes toward Jews to this very day, Putin, Kirill, and our own American Christian anti-semites not excepted.

So there's a sense in which, to see the passion whole, we need to kick against this gospel, at least in part. The stakes are high. The integrity of our Easter celebration tomorrow night and Sunday morning depends on how we perceive this cross today. To use the ancient language, for Easter to matter, we must venerate the wood of the cross, open ourselves to its scarred surface, feel with our own hands the shape of its wounded edge. Despite Helena's best efforts to unearth it, today we must rebury the cross. We must return it to the spot where the Romans had discarded it, and where Helena discovered it and transformed it into a sign of empire. We must commit ourselves to return this black instrument of torture to the execution ground, to the place of the skull, and accept Jesus's death as a real death—something not to rejoice in or look beyond, but something to see and feel and touch and accept as surely as we must accept our own.

As horrible as it may seem, as horrible as it is, today we consent to Jesus's death, just as surely as the crowd incited by the authorities consented to it. To hear this passion gospel passionately we must feel our own place within it. We are not passive listeners, but passionate participants. We take every role, play every part, repeat every betrayal, mouth every denial. We feel as helpless as Peter, as cynical as Pilate, as desperate as Judas, as devastated as Mary, as vindictive as the high priest, as relieved as Barabbas, as manipulated as the Temple rabble. We must feel all these things because we are they, and they are us, and we pass by Jesus crucified in this city every day of our lives.

But that is not where it ends. We were never passive onlookers. The stakes are too high. We are restored and forgiven sinners, challenged by that restoration and forgiveness to be for others as Jesus was for us. That's what Easter is all about—redeeming the time, being as Jesus was in the world, loving, forgiving, a bulwark against empire. We must be women and men living not just for ourselves but, in any way that is open to us, living and acting for the sake of others. Now—in this time of pestilence and imperial violence—now more than ever.

Only in rediscovering the challenge of this cross can resurrection come. In Christ's passion, we become compassionate people, at one with God, at one with God as God is revealed in the suffering of the victims of this world—the victims of violence, invasion, impoverishment, prejudice, and racism. In proclaiming our unity with the victims of this world, and however we can, acting in their defense, we proclaim the true victory of the Cross.