**Luke 23:33-43**

**Christ the King Sunday**

**Springfield Presbyterian Church - Sykesville, MD**

**Sunday, Nov. 21, 2021**

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This is a painful story.

Preaching scholar Anna Carter Florence says we should pay attention to the verbs in the text when we’re trying to understand what’s going on - and if you pay attention to the verbs in this passage at the end of Luke’s gospel, it is pretty clear what’s happening. The leaders and soldiers:

crucified

cast lots to divide his clothing

scoffed

mocked

and

derided Jesus.

And what about the crowd? What can we learn from the verbs that describe its actions in today’s text?

Luke tells us that

“The people stood by, watching.” (v. 35)

The people stood there, watching the mockery, watching them cast lots for Jesus’ clothes, watching the soldiers sarcastically offer him sour wine, listening to the taunts.

“The people stood by, watching.”

Why didn’t anyone intervene? Why didn’t anyone say something? Was there no one in the crowd brave enough to speak up? No one willing to speak out against the injustice and violence that was happening right in front of them? Was no one in the crowd courageous enough to stand up for Jesus - to share all the ways they knew that he really *was* the Messiah?

There was not one person in the crowd that day willing to stand up for Jesus. Not one person in that crowd spoke up.

While the leaders and soldiers shouted at and mocked Jesus, the crowd remained silent.

“The people stood by, watching.”

It’s an image that is all too familiar - someone being mistreated, attacked verbally or physically, while others do nothing. I can’t picture that image from today’s text - of the crowd of people standing by watching - without thinking about the video of my friend’s brother, a police officer in the D.C. metro police department, who suffered severe, life-threatening injuries after being brutally attacked in the January 6th riots at the U.S. Capitol, while others in the crowd did nothing.

I can’t picture that image of the people standing by watching without recalling a domestic dispute I passed on the sidewalk last weekend while out walking my dog. A man was verbally attacking a woman nearby as she walked away from him. As I passed, I wrestled with what to do. I was afraid, and decided to continue on my walk and not get involved. I have worried about that woman all week. I have wished that I could go back in time so that I could make a different choice - I have wished that rather than do nothing, I could instead walk toward the woman, offering accompaniment or a ride to a safe place. But instead, I stood by, watching.

It is easy to shake our heads at the inaction of others in these situations. We want to think we would behave differently.

But most of us, if we had been there in today’s story, probably would have been standing in the crowd, watching.

This is not uncommon. Researcher and professor Francesca Gino studies leadership, the psychology of decision-making, and organizational behavior at the Harvard Business School. In a 2020 interview with the Harvard Gazette, she described her research into why people don’t intervene in the face of violence against others. She says:

“Though the details of every story are different, and each of them is quite tragic in its own way, they [also] point to the bystander effect: We continue to look away in the face of danger.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The behavior of the people in the crowd that day was no different.There was no courageous leader in the crowd gathered that day. While the leaders and soldiers taunted him and shouted at him, the crowd was silent.

“The people stood by, watching.”

It’s not as if they had no answer for the questions about Jesus’ identity. The people knew who Jesus was. Every day, people had been packing into the temple to hear him teach. They knew he was the Messiah. They had seen him perform miracles - some of them probably had been healed themselves.

But the people stoody by, watching.

Was it because they were afraid, as I had been last weekend when I passed that dispute? Researchers say that fear is the biggest reason why people don’t intervene when they witness someone being harmed.

Was the taunting so vicious that the people in the crowd were scared to speak up? Was everyone waiting for someone else to do something?

Were the people in the crowd waiting for a miracle, for Jesus save himself?

We know what happened that day.

No one in the crowd stepped forward. No one in the crowd said a word.

Jesus did not save himself.

But not everyone there was silent.

As the people stood by, watching, something happened off to the side. A voice did speak out. It wasn’t the strongest voice, it wasn’t the loudest shout. It wasn’t coming from someone in the crowd.

It wasn’t the mayor, or the respected business leader, or a doctor, or the PTA President, or a member of the clergy.

The voice came from a criminal. It came from one of the others who was being crucified alongside Jesus. An outcast, someone who was hated and despised and had been judged as no longer worthy of living.

“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

That small voice from the wings - the criminal - was the only one that day to call Jesus by name. The only one to recognize him and to acknowledge him as the Messiah, the King, in the face of the hate and ridicule of this public execution.

On this Christ the King Sunday, we don’t hear about an upstanding citizen who stood up for justice. We don’t hear about a King who saved himself. We hear about a King who died in between two criminals, stripped of his clothes, while being mocked and derided.

We hear about a crowd of regular people watching and waiting for a miracle.

Hoping that someone else would do something.

On this Christ the King Sunday, we do not hear about the kingship of Jesus from the most eloquent speaker, or the most accomplished community leader. We learn about Christ the King from a criminal, a man who society wanted to get rid of.

This week, as we enter this holiday season, amid the glitter, and the celebrations, amid the shopping and the festivities, I hope we won’t miss the truth about Jesus. As we stand by waiting for the birth of the baby who will be King, I hope we won’t be looking so hard for the kind of King that fits our expectations that we miss a word of truth from an unlikely source. Because the truth about Jesus might be in our peripheral vision - it might just come from the wings. It might come from a criminal, or a stranger. It might come from an unhoused person, or a child. It might come from someone who speaks a different language, or who comes from a different country. It might come from someone who is suffering alongside Jesus - someone society wants to get rid of. Someone nobody wants to listen to. Someone who has nothing to lose. Someone with the truth about Jesus, the Prince of Peace, the King, the Messiah who will soon - once again - enter our world in the most surprising and humble of ways.

1. https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/06/police-violence-and-the-bystander-effect-explained/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)