

“What is Finished?” John 19:16b-30 4/14/19

Well, today is Palm Sunday. We've been reminded of it in the hymns and songs and prayers and anthems. Palm Sunday took place on the Sunday before Jesus went to the cross, and was the high point of Jesus' popularity as he made his way into the holy city of Jerusalem along with the massive crowds gathering for the Passover celebration later that week. But this year we have a special challenge with Palm Sunday. We've been following John's gospel for almost a year! And John places Palm Sunday in chapter 12 and then inserts several chapters of Jesus' teaching before coming back to story of the Passion again. So we dealt with chapter 12 months ago! We're in chapter 19 where last Sunday we read about Jesus' trial before Pontius Pilate. That brings us to the crucifixion today.

It may seem odd to talk about the cross on Palm Sunday- like we're getting ahead of ourselves- but I don't think it is. There's really no other place to deal with it during Holy Week except on Good Friday, which usually involves just a small part of our congregation. And since it is a central moment in God's plan to redeem humanity and bring us back into a right relationship with him, it makes sense to talk about it when more of us are present, like today.

And yet, I have to confess that I don't enjoy preaching about the cross. It was a horrifying event, showing humanity at its lowest. I find it

difficult to give it its full due without distorting the event by either making it seem antiseptic and sterile or going full Mel Gibson and focusing on the blood and gore, thus making it an emotional spectacle. But it is a crucially important part of the Bible, so I'm going to try!

Again, a little background may be helpful. The Romans used several methods of execution, with crucifixion reserved for the worst and lowest of criminals. It was never used for Roman citizens, but often for slaves and anyone who opposed Roman rule. It was designed to inflict maximum pain for the greatest length of time. It was not uncommon for death to take days for those being crucified. This prolonged suffering was fine with the Romans, who wanted people to see the full horror of what happened to those who resisted them. We pick up the story in John 19.

*<sup>16</sup>Then he handed him over to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus;<sup>17</sup>and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. <sup>18</sup>There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them.*

*<sup>19</sup>Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews."<sup>20</sup>Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was*

*written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek.* <sup>21</sup>Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, “Do not write, ‘The King of the Jews,’ but, ‘This man said, I am King of the Jews.’” <sup>22</sup>Pilate answered, “What I have written I have written.” (John 19:16-22)

There are several important themes that John weaves into his telling of the crucifixion, themes we’ve heard earlier in the book that culminate right here. We just read the first one, where Jesus is called “King of the Jews” in Pilate’s inscription on the cross. In paintings and sculptures you can often see the letters “INRI” above Jesus on the cross. Those stand for the Latin words that mean, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” Now it was common for the criminal offense to be written on crosses so everyone passing would know what the person was guilty of and be warned to avoid it. But this inscription is unusual. It simply states that Jesus is King of the Jews; There is no criminal charge! Pilate may have had two reasons for doing this. First, it may have been a jab at the Jewish leaders who had adamantly insisted on crucifying Jesus over Pilate’s objections. It was Pilate’s way of saying, “You want to crucify this man so badly? OK. But I’m still in charge here!” And the inscription also served as a warning to any other would-be Jewish kings out there.

But, Pilate is not the first person in John’s gospel to say things that are absolutely true, even though they don’t understand what they are

saying! You might remember what the high priest, Caiaphas, said in response to the fears of the Jewish high council that Jesus was going to spark an uprising that would bring the Romans down on them. He said, *“You know nothing at all. You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.”* (John 11:50) Caiaphas was right, because Jesus did die for the whole nation, to save it. But Caiaphas certainly didn’t understand this. In the case of the inscription, Pilate is right when he writes that Jesus is indeed the king, but he doesn’t understand it either. And he broadcasts that news in the three major languages of the region, so everyone can read it. By doing this he implies that Jesus is not just a local king, but that he is a universal king- over all those who speak Hebrew, Greek, or Latin- which was just about everyone in the Roman empire! Although Jesus is dying a horrible death, he is still proclaimed as king- by a Roman governor! Let’s continue.

<sup>23</sup>*When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took his tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top.* <sup>24</sup>*So they said to one another, “Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see who will get it.” This was to fulfill what the scripture says, “They divided my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.”* <sup>25</sup>*And that is what the*

soldiers did. Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. <sup>26</sup>When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." <sup>27</sup>Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. <sup>28</sup>After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), "I am thirsty." <sup>29</sup>A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. <sup>30</sup>When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (John 19:23-30)

There are all kinds of things going on here. There are several actions that John points to as the fulfillment of Old Testament scripture regarding the coming Messiah. For example, Jesus' clothes were gambled for and divided, and he acknowledged his thirst. But I'd like us to look at two bigger themes raised here.

The first one isn't explicit, but it accords with a theme raised from very beginning of the book. Jesus is the Lamb of God. When John the Baptist saw Jesus walking toward him, do you remember what he said? "*Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*" (John 1:29) The sacrifice of animals was an important part of ancient Hebrew worship.

Goats, lambs, bulls, and even doves were sacrificed to thank God, to honor God, and for the forgiveness of sins. In addition, you might remember from last week's sermon that during Jesus' trial there were several references to the festival of the Passover, which John tells us will occur the night of the crucifixion. That festival commemorates God's liberation of the Hebrew people from 400 years of slavery in Egypt, and it involved a lamb.

You see, on their last night in Egypt, God warned that an angel of death would come that night bringing death to the firstborn of every Egyptian family as judgment. Each Hebrew family was instructed to slaughter a lamb for a final meal together. They were to take the blood of that lamb and smear it on the lintels of the doorway of each Hebrew home using a hyssop branch. When the death angel saw the blood, he would pass over that home and spare them from judgment. Thus, Passover came to symbolize God's salvation and the liberation of his people, a people saved by the blood of the lamb.

At the time Jesus was being crucified, a huge number of lambs were being slaughtered for that evening's Passover meal. John believed that was no accident. A hyssop branch- the same kind used to smear the blood on the lintels of the ancient Hebrews, was even used to bring wine to Jesus when he was thirsty. Jesus was the Passover lamb for all people, bringing God's salvation and liberation from sin.

What does all this mean to us? Well, some of us are still enslaved by the kind of works-based salvation found on shows like “The Good Place,” where we have to live with the fear of not knowing whether we’ve done enough good to offset all the evil things we’ve done. Do you ever feel that way? You don’t have to! John assures us that our sins are forgiven because Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross takes them away. As he said in chapter 3, <sup>16</sup>*“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. <sup>17</sup>“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:16)* Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

The final theme is found in Jesus’ last words, “It is finished.” All the work that his Heavenly Father gave him to do to accomplish our salvation has been completed... finished. The phrase “It is finished,” or “It is completed,” is actually one word in Greek, “tetelestai.” It was written on bills that had been paid in full.

In the 2002 film, “America,” a young Irish family illegally moves from Canada to New York City seeking a fresh start following the tragic death of their 5 year-old son. They are desperately poor and wind up living in a tenement apartment in a dangerous neighborhood known for its drug-trafficking. There, they befriend an elusive African-American neighbor,

Mateo, who is seriously ill with AIDS. In time, Sarah, the mom, becomes pregnant. She winds up giving birth prematurely in the same hospital where Mateo is dying from his disease. The child needs lots of medical support, and the outcome is not at all certain. Fortunately, the baby survives, but as the family is leaving the hospital, they are informed that they owe \$30,420.20. It might as well have been \$30 million for this family. There is no way they could pay it. But then the business manager announces that someone else, a Mateo Kwame, has paid their bill in full. It was his last living act. There is no longer a balance and they are free of any debt.

“Tetelestai!” “It is finished.” It’s paid in full. That’s what Jesus did for us on the cross. He paid a debt we could never pay by giving his life as a sacrifice on our behalf. The sacrificial Lamb of God. Our response is to accept God’s gift of forgiveness and to thank God, and thank God, and thank God again! And then we give our lives to his service in gratitude. That’s what the cross is about.