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John 19:16b-24 (Part V)
Lent Midweek IV
March 18, 2020

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

In the first two weeks of our meditation on the Lord's passion, perhaps you've noticed that each of the first two portions of St. John's account of the passion of our Lord seem to have an underlying theme/focus of sorts. The first week's reading seemed to highlight the cowardice and betrayal of the disciples; the second reading seemed to focus on the response of a faithless world. Tonight's reading would seem to ask the reader to consider *history's* understanding of this Jesus. That theme may not jump out at you, but let's walk through the text and perhaps that focus will become more appreciable.

First, consider that – in giving the Scriptures – the Holy Spirit always ensures that the text is firmly grounded and rooted in the *details* of time and place, so that all of history may know of its occurrence. That may seem like a small detail to those of us who believe the Scriptures, but it is such an important detail for the benefit of the skeptic or those whose faith is wavering, encroached upon by doubts and questions of whether such things “could be true” or “may be myth.” You see, to give the historical details of who, what, where, when are the foundation of investigative

reporting for a reason: as those questions are answered, the truth becomes verifiable; everyone can determine that the story has not been manufactured because the claims can be fact-checked and verified.

For those of us 2000 years removed, skeptics may say we of ourselves have no way of verifying the crucifixion on which rests our salvation. True, but these accounts weren't first distributed "yesterday." The initial readers may well have been eyewitnesses themselves! Or had relatives, neighbors who were eyewitnesses. It's sort of like a modern news story: there's no way to print something in the newspaper or post it online as having happened without some of the readers being able to say, "Wait a minute, that didn't happen... I was there! I need to set the record straight!" What's everyone's new favorite phrase?: "Fake news." That shouldn't be heard to say, "I don't like the tone of the story," but it *is* accurate to question whether the reporters are reporting factually. And, though that's often an argument among today's news reports, it's not a new argument, as – had the disciples recorded the events of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection *incorrectly* – many eyewitnesses could have said, "Not true. Fake news."

So, not only do the Scriptures give very detailed account about, for example, the incarnation of our God and the birth of Christ when Quirinius was governor of Syria and registration was taken for the census... or of the beginning of John the Baptist's

ministry “in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis” ... but also historical details of the death of Christ: A specific hill called “Golgotha”, John’s text says, undoubtedly known by the vast majority of those in Jerusalem, who – had it *not* been the location of Roman crucifixion – could have easily pointed out that glaring error. Again, we’ll hear in a few weeks, “near where he was crucified there was a garden... They laid him there.” That may mean nothing for the 70th generation after his death and resurrection, but the *first* generation could go to that garden and see that there, indeed, was the empty tomb. And (by the way) no records in first century history are ever given to supposedly “correct the record” – only the tyranny of Rome that attempted unsuccessfully to burn and silence the record. So, just because the historical locations are *now* uncertain – lost to history – such does not make them *then* uncertain... or, worse, ahistorical.

Similarly, our text records that Jesus was crucified with two other criminals – one on his right, one on his left. In what fictional story does the hero share the spotlight with two average people? In what movie or book does the main character share the attention with two people largely irrelevant to the story?

But here is Jesus, between two criminals. To the Romans, he’s only one of three that day. Probably more victims to be crucified

the next, just as there had been the day before. He's just another common criminal who is to share in the mass executions that leave him unknown to history.

But, the divine will has other plans; in the divine plans of God Most High, this 'being crucified between two others' is no insignificant detail, as Isaiah 53 even prophesies his death would be "with the wicked" and the eerie prophecies of the 22nd psalm give the historic detail that "All (including those crucified with him) who see me mock me; they make mouths at me; they wag their heads: 'He trusts in the LORD, let *him* deliver him; let *him* rescue him, for he delights in him!"

But, while the crowds and fellow criminals consider him a forgettable, unremarkable victim of Roman torture, interestingly a debate brews over how he should be identified for history's sake. And, make no mistake, Pilate wants it to be known to all people: he writes it in three languages; and Pilate hangs a sign over the criminal's head that calls him, "Jesus of Nazareth, king of the Jews." And the debate erupts: "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but rather, 'This man said, I am King of the Jews.'" And Pilate responds, "What I have written, I have written."

How proud is man in thinking he can write and re-write history! Pilate thinks it comes with his authority. The Jewish leaders want to trivialize it by making it a mere claim, rather than an authoritative statement. Both are vying for what history will record

of this man. And both are sad examples of how the world deals with the Christ: some claiming it's within their authority to assign him a status, others claiming his are merely claims of a lunatic or liar, but certainly not of Lord of lords and King of kings.

We may not have the status to wage this debate over the signposts for the people. But we certainly do sinfully seek to write or rewrite such history in our own hearts and lives and, if we're not careful, for our spouses and children and grandchildren. We reason to ourselves,

- *“Not ‘God is faithful and just,’ but ‘He said, he is faithful and just.’”*
- *“Not ‘our help is in the name of the Lord,’ but ‘He claims, ‘our help is in the name of the Lord.’”*
- *“Not ‘Every good gift and perfect gift comes from above,’ but ‘He gives empty promises that ‘every good gift and perfect gift comes from above.’”*
- *“Not ‘God in the flesh, the Savior of the world, my Lord and my length of days,’ but ‘He said – and I’ll believe him when I want – that he is ‘God in the flesh, the Savior of the world, my Lord and my length of days.’”*

Yes, in our inner hearts and minds, we pride ourselves in getting to determine what should be the final word of history. We love to claim we get to be the final arbiter of history's truth. We whose lives seem totally powerless to and captive of a virus nevertheless love to believe it is in our power to either write this Jesus into the history books or write him off in shameful death.

But that authority doesn't even belong to the governor of Rome or to the Jewish leaders. It was not by *their* will – no matter how they disagreed with one another over what should be written for history's sake – *neither* of them could claim their will ruled the day, for the prophecy says to properly define all of history, "it was the will of the Lord to crush him." Yes, the divine will prophesied in great detail throughout the *Old Covenant* in anticipation of and to be carried out in the birth of and history of the *New Covenant*, every little historical fact even down to the detail of his tunic. John records the fulfillment of the prophecy that the 22nd psalm had first uttered: "They divided my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots."

And John shows God's authoritative hand behind that fulfilling of the prophecy when he concludes, "So the soldiers did these things." Did these things because that's what God had prophesied they would do. Did these things because that's how God had pre-written and pre-ordained the history.

And, as the history he pre-ordained is all focused on the death of Christ, then you can be certain that he had also pre-ordained your salvation, to be carried out in history, to be certain for all of history... that you can say, "Not only did this happen; it happened *for me*. History has an impact on me. History *benefits me*."

Isn't it amazing how we so instinctively recognize that what happened historically impacts us: that, a virus that started across the

world three months ago quite directly impacts us... that World Wars of the previous century have defined the world in ours... that 250 years ago, throwing tea into a harbor signaled a revolution that quite directly impacted the daily life we live today... that more than 2000 years ago, the rise of the Greek and Roman empires shaped the western world for millenia. And yet, somehow, we so often fail to appreciate the even greater historical truth which overcomes them all, means more than them all combined!... that God had pre-ordained and brought to pass His own invasion into human history to change it eternally. And that event once in history defined your entire baptismal life, safeguards you in the uncertain times of daily life, and promises you eternal life.

This is why the coming of the Messiah was prophesied from history with greatest detail, fulfilled in history with greatest detail, and yet (back to our text for this evening's meditation) the very first audiences of history argued over what it all meant and whether it could be believed.

It's still argued over today... all the 20/20 hindsight can say that "it happened," but – only by faith – can one say, even in the face of sin's great threats, even when feeling totally isolated from all things helpful... even then, one can say by faith "It happened for me."

So, though our text tonight is all about those who refused to acknowledge the divine truth of what has happening at that moment

in history, let Pilate and the Jewish leaders be our unsuspecting teachers; for even out of the mouths and from the hands of his enemies, the Lord makes known his wondrous truth. Let them be our examples, that we might not die in sin as did they.

Let them be our examples, that what they both unwittingly confessed as they debated over a sign, we might very intentionally confess as we have seen the signs... that this is the fundamental truth: Yes, this seemingly common criminal unworthy to be remembered in history, yes... this is he who proved himself to be the long awaited King of the Jews, “salvation is from the Jews”, He said of himself... Jesus of Nazareth, King of kings, Lord of lords, who yet gave himself at a very specific place on a very specific day because he was God’s specifically-promised Messiah and, thus, the ransom for many, that we might on this day in history, at this unique and troubling time in history, cry to him on his throne, “Kyrie eleison, Lord have mercy.”

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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