

We kill the flame

Luke 22 and 23

Text: Luke 23:22-24

A third time he (Pilate) said to them, ‘Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him.’ But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted.

Introduction

Musician Leonard Cohen died on Nov. 7, 2016. Just seven weeks earlier, in September, Cohen celebrated his 82nd birthday with an announcement that his upcoming LP, *You Want It Darker*, would arrive in October. On his birthday the veteran musician released the mesmerizing title track, which, according to a press release, “delves into an unflinching exploration of the religious mind.”

I have borrowed a line from his song for the sermon title for today. The lyrics are haunting.

Magnified, sanctified
Be thy holy name
Vilified, crucified
In the human frame
A million candles burning
For the love that never came
You want it darker
We kill the flame

You want it darker, We kill the flame. I find Cohen’s reflection an apt description of what happened on Good Friday; on God’s Friday. Sin always wants things darker. So we kill the flame.

1. Luke tells us that three times Pilate declared Jesus innocent; “I have found no ground for the sentence of death.” So why does Pilate then say that he will have him flogged? If Jesus was innocent of any crime that would call for the sentence of death, what had he done that meant he ought to be flogged? Jesus was going to get flogged either way because flogging always preceded crucifixion. Did they flog people because they were a nuisance? Where there is smoke there is fire, we

say, so Jesus may not have done anything that deserved death because lots of people were complaining about him. So he must have done something.

Is this the first time someone was wrongfully put to death by Rome's justice system? The idea that Jesus was crucified, though clearly innocent of any crime that called for the sentence of death, is a travesty of justice. But he isn't the only one who suffered injustice at the hands of judges. There is more to this injustice than a flagrant wrongful sentence. Wrongful convictions happen today too. A person may well be innocent of something for which they are charged but there is more to Jesus' innocence than that. I may be innocent of some crime for which I am convicted but I am a far cry from innocent before God. If every thought, word, and action of your life were brought into the light of day who among us is innocent? But Jesus is. The travesty of this story is more than we can see on the surface because Jesus is the sinless Son of God. He is truly innocent in every sense of the word; all the time, every time.

The story says that Jesus is on trial but in reality we are on trial before Jesus. The Apostle Paul said, that 'For our sake God made Jesus to be sin who knew no sin.' I am sure we cannot fathom the depths of what all that means but on Good Friday our sin is exposed for what it is. The utter sinfulness of sin, the wickedness of evil is on display in what is being done to Jesus the sinless Son of God. Sin kills the flame. Sin—our sin—seeks to snuff out Jesus, the light of the world.

Think about Pilate for a moment. He had risen through the ranks of the Roman world and was appointed to Palestine as ruler on Rome's behalf. The palace he occupied was on the Mediterranean coast at Caesarea Mamertine—a beautiful place to live. Even so, Israel was considered a bit of a backwater and Pilate is hoping to do a good job so that a more prestigious appointment could be his. He also had troubles with the Jews—Rome hated troubles—and in order to keep his job he couldn't afford any riots. We can see that he makes decisions based on expediency. Innocence or guilt is beside the point.

This is hardly the first time Pilate made such a decision. Decisions like this usually follow a pattern that has developed that began small with seemingly innocuous things. Let me ask, who among us has not made such a decision. Suppose we detect some corruption in the company we work for or are uncomfortable with some practice that feels shady—but we need the job, our family depends on it.

On March 24, 2022 a [news story](#) revealed that the former president of Canada's largest private-sector union, Unifor, had been accused of accepting \$50,000 from a COVID-19 rapid test supplier in return for promoting the kits to his members' employers. Are any of us immune to these sorts of temptations? What was interesting to me was that there was no discussion of why this might be a problem—only that this person was accused of violating Article 4 of Unifor's constitution concerning the union's code of ethics and democratic practices.

In John's gospel we are told of Pilate's cynical response to Jesus when Jesus said he 'came to testify to the truth'—'what is truth,' snorted Pilate. Truth is what Pilate says it is or beside the point. Sin is on display here in all its wickedness—exposed by the light that is Jesus Christ even as he becomes sin for us.

2. Sin doesn't just pervert justice. Think about the wickedness of crucifixion. As a means of execution crucifixion was designed to inflict horrible pain and humiliation; pain in that sometimes it took three or four days for a person to die; humiliation because you were crucified naked. Crucifixion had as its express purpose the elimination of victims from consideration as members of the human race. It cannot be said too strongly; that was its function. It was meant to indicate, to all who might be toying with subversive ideas, that crucified persons were not of the same species as either the executioners or the spectators and were therefore not only expendable but also deserving of ritualized extermination.

We do say that Jesus died for our sin but the gospel insists that he was crucified. The Apostle Paul insisted, I preached Christ and him crucified. Sin doesn't just kill the flame but seeks to humiliate and eliminate Jesus and declare him sub-human. In other words there is something about the manner in which he was killed that corresponds to the utter wickedness of sin. Our sin is being exposed and it's not pretty. Sin isn't a matter of "I just misspoke" or "I made the odd mistake." It is far worse than we imagine. At the cross the gravity of sin is on display.

Biblically speaking, sin means something very much more consequential than wrongdoing. It means being catastrophically separated from the eternal love of God. It means to be on the other side of an impassable barrier of exclusion from God's heavenly banquet. It means to be helplessly trapped inside one's own worst self, miserably aware of the chasm between the way we are and the way God intends us to be. Sin is a relational category that as its heart is to turn away from God in rebellion.

What sort of predicament are you and I in that should require the crucifixion of the sinless Son of God? So catastrophic a remedy demands a catastrophic predicament. The crucifixion of Jesus is of such a magnitude that it must call forth the conception of sin that is large enough to match. Looking at Jesus on the cross, we see the degradation and God-forsakenness of it and we see the corresponding gravity, the weight, of sin. If we transfer the notion of value to the cross, noting the extreme dehumanization and humiliation of it, we may conclude the gravity of sin so great that no correspondence in heaven and earth was weighty enough except the self offering of the Son of God.

3. I know that this is a hard message to hear as we have drilled down on what the crucifixion of the sinless Son of God witnesses about the gravity of our predicament, the awful weight of sin. While we cannot know in any complete sense what sin means to God, each year as I come again to Good Friday and try once more to probe some aspect of the gravity of the predicament of sin, I grow in my appreciation of the wonder of God's love in that he would do this to rescue me from this dire situation.

Here is the good news. The very fact that you and I have been made aware of our predicament is because it is part of God rescuing us. Our Reformation foreparents called this prevenient grace—meaning the grace that goes before. Sin is such that we are not aware of our predicament. Sin blinds us to our sinnership. Only by the ray of the light of God do we become aware of our sin. Charles Wesley in the hymn “And can it be” described it beautifully;

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quick'ning ray,
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free;
I rose, went forth and followed Thee.

The very fact that we know about sin is because of God's incursion in our lives to be save. This is good news—our awareness of sin and admission that it is in me witness that we are being saved.

Theologian Karl Barth preached regularly to the inmates of the prison in his hometown of Basel Switzerland. Knowledge of the context adds poignancy to the sermons. One of the sermons is based on Ephesians 2:8, “for by grace you have been saved through faith; this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God.” He illustrated this by retelling a Swiss legend; “you probably all know the legend of

the rider who crossed the frozen lake of Constance by night without knowing it. When he reached the opposite shore and was told whence he came, he broke down horrified.” Barth went on to point out that this is our experience when we hear, “by grace you have been saved.’

Our growing appreciation of the gravity of sin, as we witness afresh the crucifixion of the sinless son of God, has us horrified as we recognize the true danger from which we have been rescued.

I suspect that this may have been a hard sermon to hear. There is no way to make Good Friday pretty. The truly good news is that the darkness did not overcome the light—but that is a message that has to wait until Sunday. For now, on Good Friday, You want it darker, we kill the flame.