

A Battered Gospel

Isaiah 50:4-6 ⁴ The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens-- wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught.

⁵ The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. ⁶ I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.

Matthew 26:47-53 ⁴⁷ While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. ⁴⁸ Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him." ⁴⁹ At once he came up to Jesus and said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kissed him. ⁵⁰ Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what you are here to do." Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him. ⁵¹ Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. ⁵² Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. ⁵³ Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?"

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Last Tuesday, Michael Blythe spoke at the Lenten Devotional Service. My ears really perked up when I heard Michael say, "We all have our way of shaping the gospel to our convenience and even, at times, battering it in the process." Often, as people living in the twenty-first century, we can forget just how different life was in the time of Christ. News was by word of someone's mouth, not printed or broadcast. As Christians, when we read of Jews, we think of others, but Jesus was speaking to brothers. In many ways, we're hampered by the distances of time and space and cultural changes that separate us from Jesus and the early disciples. We assume elected government; they assumed kings of royal descent or appointed governors. We assume that everyone has a say about choosing their faith and their rulers. They assumed that government and faith were essentially inherited. And so, Michael legitimately asked us if we will let the gospel overcome our prejudices, our knowledge, our opinions, our desires, or will we batter the gospel, consciously or unconsciously, reshaping it in large and small ways, fitting it to our lifestyle and our viewpoint?

Many of us can look back now and see a clear example of how our view of life has affected our view of scripture. So long as society and the male ego declared that women were the weaker and more befuddled gender, we read the Bible with that assumption and we found verses that confirmed what seemed to be plainly obvious truth. So in history we ignored Catherine of Aragon, Isabelle of Spain, and Elizabeth I of England. In scripture we ignored Deborah, Naomi, Miriam, Phoebe, and several Marys, to name a few important women of faith. Despite the texts and examples to the contrary, we failed to understand that in Christ there was neither male nor female, failed to accept Phoebe as a deacon or Junia as an apostle, and we men failed to love half of our neighbors as ourselves, and we blindly thought nothing of it.

For a couple of years I have been considering the possibility that we have a similar blindness problem with parts of the story of Holy Week. Let's take another look at some of the moments leading up to Christ's death. The Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John tell us that when the authorities came to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemene, someone drew a sword and cut off a man's ear. Immediately, Jesus stopped the sword play. What's more, Luke tells us that Jesus healed the ear of this man who had come to arrest him. If we only see this moment in the Garden as part of a pre-determined series of events, then it has little to do with us. But then we recall that in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught, "I say to you, 'Do not resist an evildoer.'" That's what Jesus taught. That's what Jesus did.

There in Gethsemene, Jesus went on to say, "Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?" Jesus said that he had the option of calling

in overwhelming forces, yet he chose not to do so. Jesus, in the midst of danger, lived as he had taught others. On the mount he had said, "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." When push came to shove, Jesus chose to walk the walk in compliance and unity with the talk that he had talked.

Later that night, Jesus was brought before Pilate, the Roman governor of Palestine and the issue of armed resistance came up again. Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?" If someone claimed to be king of the Jews, Rome would see that as treason and sedition. Rome was in charge, and Rome would decide who ruled Palestine. Jesus replied to Pilate, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me" free. Jesus taught, "Do not resist an evildoer." That's what Jesus taught. That's what Jesus did.

After his appearance before Pilate, Jesus was led away to be executed. He had been beaten. He had been spit on and ridiculed. What sort of person taunts and tortures a man who is about to be executed in the most hideous and painful way that had been devised at that time? Stripped naked, he hung there helplessly as the guards gambled for the clothes they had ripped off of him. He hung there naked, humiliated before his mother and the women who had supported his ministry out of their own purses. Helpless, humiliated, and hurting with every breath, he prayed, "Father, forgive them." In the very horror of dying, he not only lived as he had taught, he died as he had taught, for he had said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

We view the events with some detachment. They happened so long ago. We weren't involved. The events leading up to death on the cross are less disturbing if we think of them only as a pre-planned series of events, predicted long before, everything unfolding as arranged. As terrible as things were, we aren't involved. Nothing is demanded of us. We only have to be grateful for the benefits that we receive from the death and resurrection of Jesus. We're content to see a divine plan in Holy Week so long as it's about people back then killing Jesus - and us reaping the benefits of forgiveness and salvation. But there's more going on than we want to consider.

We overlook the moments in scripture that point to this whole story being something other than a divine drama with all of the characters playing their parts exactly as the script had been written long ago. In fear and anguish, Jesus prayed for a way out that night in the Garden of Gethsemane. If there was a script, Jesus was asking for a rewrite. "Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me." What had Jesus taught about prayer? "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." That night in the garden, evil was on the prowl. Evil was approaching with torches, coming to arrest Jesus, and temptation would arrive at the same moment. "Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?"

There's the temptation. There's the option. It only takes a request and it's a done deal. It really is the obvious choice. Use the force at your disposal to vanquish evil. Talk about shock and awe! Picture the headlines. "Heavenly Host invades Jerusalem to protect Jesus. Not a single Roman survives the night. Roman ships sink in the harbors on the coast as Roman soldiers stampede and overload the ships. Caesar begs for a cease fire and grovels before Jesus and his radiant winged bodyguards." Jesus doesn't have a script; he has a choice. And he chooses to live the way of life that he has taught. "Do not resist an evildoer. Love your enemies."

During Holy Week we want to forget that Jesus was wholly and completely human. We only want to think of him as wholly and completely divine. God can do those hard things, make those painful choices that we read about. But don't remind us that Jesus was human and that a human made those hard choices, a human was begging to be delivered from evil, but refused to wield power that was available to him.

We love Christmas. We so enjoy singing the Christmas carols and thinking about a beautiful baby surrounded by shepherds and foreigners bringing expensive gifts. It's such a happy time. We love Easter. Not even death can conquer Jesus, and his resurrection assures us of our own resurrection. We aren't so wholeheartedly enthusiastic about the years in between birth and resurrection. Oh, we like the

miracles. They're very impressive. But they don't directly affect us in our daily life. It's a fearsome thing to hear the message of Jesus that he taught in the Sermon on the Mount. The teachings are so lofty and so difficult that we figure he must have been exaggerating for effect. It's inspiring to watch how he lived the way of life that he taught. But he was God in the flesh, and so he could act that way, we reason. And we begin to batter the gospel by seeing it as a wonderful story that has little to say about how we as mortals are to live and act. It is awesome and frightening to watch him chose to die rather than abandon the way of life that he taught. And we really don't want to hear that Jesus not only invites us to hear his message, he calls us to follow his example, live the life he showed us, and stay on the path wherever it leads. But he reassures us with the promise, "Fear not, for I am with you." Fear not. Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,
Our call is simple, but not always easy.
Learn what Jesus taught
And live a life that corresponds to those teachings.
Be careful not to batter the gospel in the process.

Rom 5:10 NRS ¹⁰ For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.

Luke 22:50-51 NRS ⁵⁰ Then one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear. ⁵¹ But Jesus said, "No more of this!" And he touched his ear and healed him.

John 18:33-36 NRS ³³ Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" ³⁴ Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" ³⁵ Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" ³⁶ Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."

Luke 23:33-34 NRS ³³ When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴ Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing.

Mat 5:38-47 NRS ³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' ³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; ⁴⁰ and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; ⁴¹ and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴² Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. ⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?"

Matthew 26:39 NRS ³⁹ And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want."

There are several passages in Isaiah are often understood as predictive with regard to Jesus, or at least descriptive of his situation. One is Isaiah 57:8. "He was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people." Another translation reads, "He was cut off from the land of the living through the sin of my people, who deserved the punishment. When we hear this passage as saying that Christ was killed for our sins, we have no involvement in the event except to accept the benefits of his death. But the word can also be translated as "through" or "because of." We are quick to say that Jesus died for our sins, but we don't want to read the passage as Christ died because of our sins. For = "by reason of" the transgression of my people

Isaiah 53:7-8 NRS ⁷ He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. ⁸ By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people.

Isaiah 53:8 TaNaK By oppressive judgment he was taken away, Who could describe his abode? For he was cut off from the land of the living through the sin of my people, who deserved the punishment.