

**EXECUTION BY THE STATE; LUKE 22:66-23:25; PALM/PASSION SUNDAY,
MARCH 20, 2016; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

The national drama being played out on the campaign trail has both captivated and repulsed many. It has, at times, been a three-ring circus not wholly excluding the Democrats; but to their credit, Hillary and Bernie have rejected the personal, low-level attacks that typify all but John Kasich on the Republican side.

It is not my aim today to laud the Democrats or to endorse any of the people still on the campaign trail.

My purpose in pointing to the current machinations on the national political scene is to draw a parallel between them and the orchestration of the leaders and the people in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago.

Inevitably, there is some Pilate, not wanting to rock the boat of his superiors, exercising his considerable authority not in pursuit of justice but to keep his own position intact. We see him throughout history.

Herod, a wealthy prince of privilege and narcissist whose main goal was to build as many monuments to himself as possible, was rude and crude, a womanizer, ruthless where his enemies were concerned and willing to break the rules of civilization and social decorum to get what he wanted. He too appears in every age.

Second tier players are the duplicitous Pharisees, scribes, and elders of the Sanhedrin; together they determine the boundaries of daily living because they are the keepers and interpreters of the laws that govern life in Palestine from social custom to crime and punishment to labor and commerce. Their progeny litter the landscape of history.

What happened in Jesus' last week, as it did during the Reformation, and in late Puritan, witch-hunt New England, and at the turn of the 20th century when Fundamentalism in America hit its high watermark; and what is happening now, in presidential politics and a society in which the mission of many public institutions founders, is that leadership and language are pushed to the extreme. As the status quo teeters, brokers of power turn to hate and open the door to violence as they search for scapegoats including illegal aliens, protestors at their rallies and our black President.

There is a quid pro quo between the leaders and the people; the leaders are willing to say what the people are thinking in their darkest thoughts and the people are willing to demand what the leaders want in their unbridled ambition for power. Without the people playing their part none of the threats, racist innuendo, or proposed extremist solutions to our national problems that are commonly offered up today (but would have been unthinkable even five years ago) would be possible.

These were the circumstances in Palestine when Jesus was brought before a succession of kangaroo courts and corrupt judges. None of the characters, neither Pilate nor Herod nor the chief priests were an accident or aberration just as Hitler was no accident after the Treaty of Versailles and Donald Trump is no accident today.

The stature and credibility of violent saviors grows and thrives in the climate of fear and xenophobia. The toxic nutrients that feed them are a sense of scarcity, anxiety about personal survival and suspicion and paranoia about those who are different and with whom we perceive ourselves to be in competition for resources.

To see the dynamics of our current national life reflected in past cultures is poignant if not alarming. Op-ed pundits have drawn parallels between some of the presidential candidates today and fascism in Italy and Germany in the 1930s; but the ancestors of demagoguery reach back to antiquity; David Brooks in his Friday column last week quoted from the 73rd Psalm: ⁱ

Pride is their necklace; violence covers them like a garment. Their eyes swell out with fatness; their hearts overflow with follies. They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression. They set their mouths against heaven, and their tongues range over the earth. Therefore, the people turn and praise them and find no fault in them.

It is into this cauldron of fear and danger that Jesus knowingly, bravely walks. What was to transpire in Jerusalem by Friday of Holy Week was as clear to him way back in chapter 9 in a Samaritan village when he 'set his face set to go to Jerusalem' as it was when he bounced along on the back of a rented donkey and made his way into the Holy City. What is soon to take place, as his followers greet him and the chief priests plot his death, is the division of the nation that Simeon predicted at his birth.

Regardless of how many times we have read or heard it, there is always high drama in the events that are triggered and unfold when Jesus enters the city. But what makes this ancient story *our story* is when we are able to see our faces in that first century crowd, and when we hear our voices in the voices that welcome him then turn, on Friday, to chants for his death.

We are the ones indicted today, as fickle as the jittery, manipulated crowd then; seeing our saviors, falling down before them when we think they will give us everything our hearts desire, then turning against them when they do not deliver what we expect.

That's the picture Luke presents today. I do not mean to imply that we are all Trump supporters; far from it; indeed, I have yet to encounter anyone who says they intend to vote for him – which may say more about the bubble I live in than anything else. But Trump is a symptom of deeper fear, anxiety and willingness to live on the edge.

We live in and support a society that wrings all the profit it can out of a seriously depleted planet; we support entertainment that depends upon considerable doses of violence and the exploitation of women for box office success; we thrill at professional contact sports that turn athletes into brain damaged young adults.

We are all too familiar with the epidemic of gun violence; the mass distribution of opioids to numb our pain; and the mass marketing of pharmaceuticals that promise the end of suffering while their real threat to our health is calmly narrated over images of happy people holding children, riding bikes and walking dogs. What used to be unacceptable or distasteful is, by today's standards, quaint.

As the world grows smaller, hotter and more violent we would do well to heed some of the signs that we are in trouble.

Today's scripture offers such a warning. Like a physician who delivers the truth about a diagnosis, the relevance and redemption of the Bible is that it tells the truth about us. If the Bible were only about the lilies of the valley and birds of the field, it would not be our book. But the Bible is our book because it is about us, the people we are rather than the people we wish, in our fantasies, we were. And because the Bible is about us, it can be a terrifying book.ⁱⁱ

Upon seeing ourselves there described, most weeks we'd repent, reform and pledge to do better; but this week, Holy Week, I suggest that we sit still and watch the unfolding of these disturbing events.

As devoted as we would be to the season finale of *Downton Abbey* or *House of Cards* or in our house the shark-tank, legal thriller *Suits* let us focus this week on the final steps he takes: as he sits at table one last time with his followers on Thursday night and Judas leaves the room to betray the man who believed in him.

Let us stand under the torch light in the crowd that marched through the streets behind Judas and the police, with their weapons drawn, and watch closely as Judas kisses Jesus and the guards push forward to arrest him.

And let us take in the whole sequence Friday night, here in this room, from the quickly called meeting of the Sanhedrin to the cross on the garbage heap outside of town, where he is stripped, whipped and nailed to two pieces of wood that are lifted and stood up in a post hole, the weight of his body tearing the flesh of his hands and feet against the iron nails; exposed to the elements, subjected to the curses and taunts of the people.

I once heard that it takes hardened criminals up to ten years, in prison, to finally recognize and fully admit to themselves responsibility for the crimes they committed. I am not suggesting we are hardened criminals; but I am saying that we live such busy, over-scheduled lives that it is easy to pass by the sorrows as well as the joys of life without fully taking in their gravity or impact.

Since my guess is none of us would have stepped forward from the crowd that day and called for the release of this innocent man, it may be better for us to sit with our complicity and contemplate its reach into our every day lives: how willing we have become to be silent, to ignore the suffering around us, to insure our well-being and comfort and disregard our neighbor and those who languish under the injustice of the system.

This is the day and this is the week that Jesus invades our darkness and confronts the betrayal of our own values at the very depths of our being – the place where fear and self-preservation reign over our priorities and decisions. 'Death lurks in the shadows throughout every event of this week. The story starkly confirms: God wills this. Jesus does not begrudgingly give up his life to the forces of evil. He offers it willingly. He wades into the bloody darkness alone, in quiet confidence that he will not be alone forever.'ⁱⁱⁱ

“The good news is that he did not flinch from the murderous mob, nor side-step the terror, nor miraculously escape into some divine world, hermetically sealed from human pain and suffering.

He came among us. He passed through the waving palm branches and marched with us up to death – up to the Place of the Skull.”^{iv}

He embraced all the terrible, horrifying, painful ambiguity of human existence, recognizing that it compromises not only our relationships with one another but with him and with the Creator of Life and he said, “Brothers and Sisters, I love you still.” Amen.

ⁱ David Brooks, “No, Not Trump, Not Ever,” *The New York Times*, Friday, March 18, 2016, A25.

ⁱⁱ William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, January through March, 2016. 49.

ⁱⁱⁱ Willimon, 49.

^{iv} Willimon, 50.