



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Behold, the Man!

St. John 19

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The more things change, the more they stay the same. At the end of John 18 there's that familiar scene of Jesus before Pilate. On the one hand Pilate has no interest in crucifying Jesus, but he's also finding the whole situation a pain in the neck. Pilate's only real interest was in keeping the peace in Judea and these Jews weren't making it easy for him. And so he had Jesus brought to him and he asked, "Are you the King of the Jews?" And Jesus responded, "Are you asking because you're interested or because that's what you've heard people say about me?" And Pilate responds, "Am I Jew? Why should I care if you're King of the Jews or not? It's your skin on the line. Your own people—your own priests!—arrested you and handed you over to me. I'm giving you a chance to explain yourself. So what do you have to say?"

Jesus goes on to explain in those well-known (and often misunderstood words), "My kingdom is not from this world. If it were, my disciples would have taken up arms to save me from the soldiers of the high priest." And Pilate, confused and getting annoyed asks, "So are you a king or not?" And Jesus responded, "You're the one calling me a king. I was born for this. I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who belongs to

the truth listens to my voice." And we can hear the annoyance and the exasperation in Pilate's famous answer, "What is truth?" And with that he went back out to address the Judeans. He didn't understand what Jesus was saying, but that didn't mean Jesus was guilty. Pilate went out and told them as much. It was usual for the governor to free a Jewish prisoner at Passover, so Pilate offered them a choice: Jesus or Barabbas. Barabbas was a monster. Surely they'd choose Jesus, because they certainly didn't want Barabbas out of prison. But, no, to Pilate's great surprise, they shouted out for the release of Barabbas and the crucifixion of Jesus. Pilate gave up. He symbolically washed his hands and declared to the people, this is on you, not me. And they took Jesus off to die.

Just like Pilate, people have been stumbling over these words of Jesus for two thousand years. People hear him say that his kingdom is not *from* or not *of* this world and they then say to us, "Well, then leave me alone. Go worship in your church and leave the rest of us be. Enjoy your pie in the sky when you die." Even Christians have misunderstood this to mean that we should disengage from the world. But that's not it at all. Jesus' kingdom may not be *from* this world, but it is most certainly *for* this world. It's the only hope this world has. It's what Jesus means when he tells us to pray "on earth as it is in heaven"—to look forward to, to hope for, and to pray for that day when God has set his creation to rights, when earth and heaven and God and man are back together as they—as we—should be. As he created it all and us in the beginning. This is what Jesus bore witness to and it's what

we, forgiven and washed and filled with his Spirit are called not only to pray for but to witness to the world and the people around us. It's that kingdom that comes not by the sword—which is the only kind of kingdom Pilate could think of. Instead, it's the kingdom that comes by the love we saw last night as Jesus shared bread and wine with his disciples and then washed their feet. It's the kingdom that we see coming today, on Good Friday, as Jesus goes to the cross.

On Good Friday, at the cross, all the great stories of the love of God come together in one place. As John tells us the story of Good Friday, he brings all these other stories together. There's Psalm 22 and Psalm 69 and there's Isaiah and Zechariah, and there's the Passover lamb whose bones were not broken and it all points us to the big story of the God of Israel and his people and his love for them—a love that was meant to be, through them, for everyone and for all of creation. They were his agents for challenging the power of evil in the world, for being light in the darkness. And, of course, as we read the Old Testament, we see that their story—not very surprisingly—their story got stuck in the very problem for which it was supposed to be an answer—the great problem of rebellion and sin. And yet, Israel's failure was God's opportunity to announce his love once again. He would be faithful to his people. He would send his Messiah and his Messiah would fulfil his purposes for the world.

Think of that bigger story. Going back to the beginning we're told about the men of Babel and their tower. They'd lost all knowledge of their creator. They grasped at divinity themselves, reaching

towards heaven. God confused their languages. There's that "What is truth?" question all the way back there! And there, in the midst of deep darkness, just as the human race seems well and truly and utterly lost, God shows up to make himself known to Abraham and to announce that through Abraham and his family, he will make himself known to the world. A glimmer of light in the darkness. And then that family winds up enslaved in Egypt, so the Lord sends Moses to confront Pharaoh and to lead his people out of bondage—and Passover happens. There are centuries of ups and downs for Israel, but each time things go bad, the Lord sends a deliverer. And then finally he gives Israel a king—Saul—and the Philistines kill him. So the Lord raises up the lowly shepherd, David, who establishes a great kingdom and the Lord promises him a future heir who will be God's own son and who will rule forever and ever. And then more centuries of ups and downs, of faithfulness and failure—mostly failure—until Babylon brings Israel down in shame and takes her off into exile. And when Israel is at her lowest, shamed and disgraced, that's when the Lord points to her through the Prophet and declares: Behold, my servant. And then, as we've seen in Daniel, the great empires rose from the sea and over them all the Lord exalts the son of man as their judge.

And, Brothers and Sisters, this story echoes all through our Good Friday Gospel today. We see Rome, another of those imperial monsters rising from the sea. And Rome does what Rome did best, brutally killing a rebel king. John shows us Pilate as he brings Jesus

out to the people the day before Passover and announced, "Behold your king!" But those Sadducee priests didn't want a Messiah any more than they wanted a resurrection. In fact, they didn't want a Messiah so much that they shouted out the unthinkable, "We have no king but Caesar!" John shows us Babel and Egypt and Philistia and Babylon at their worst and then he shows us the seed of Abraham, the one greater than Moses, the son of David, the servant of the Lord and declares, "Behold the man! Behold your king!"

And yet, for all it seems that Rome and the Sadducees are out of control, they never really are. As we've seen in Daniel, the beasts rise from the sea and they rage, but the God of Israel never ceases to be sovereign. Even in their evil, the beasts of empire serve his purpose. So, ironically, it's Pilate the Roman governor, the man cynical of the very idea of truth, who in God's providence, declares the truth to the people as he announces to them, "Here is your king!" Even as the priests protest his placard on the cross, Pilate again stand firm on the truth, insisting, "What I have written, I have written." John powerfully reminds us that even this cynical, self-serving servant of Caesar will serve the Lord's purposes. Jesus had said to him, "You have no authority over me unless it is given to you from above." So Rome does what Rome does best. It mocks and it kills and yet, in doing that, it providentially serves God's purposes and proves the point that the God of Abraham and Moses and David does not fight the battle against evil with the weapons of the world, but with love. Everyone that day thought

that Caesar had won. The devils were dancing with joy that Friday. And yet Caesar and the priests and the devils all played right into God's hand. As evil rose to its full height, as it was concentrated all in one place, God won the victory against it on Good Friday.

At the cross, God's project to set his creation to rights is finally accomplished. This why John opens his Gospel with those powerful echoes of Genesis. In Genesis we read that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. John echoes those words as he tells us that in the beginning was the word and the word became flesh and dwelt amongst us—bringing heaven and earth back together. All through John there are these creation themes. There's light and darkness. There's the seed that will bear fruit and multiply. And now on Friday, the sixth day of the week, the day when God crowned his work of creation with the creation of man to rule his new world, John shows us Pilate bringing out Jesus, robed in purple and wearing a crown of thorns, and he declares to the people, "Behold the man!" Jesus is the true image of God and the world is so mired in rebellion and sin that God's own people, confronted with the image of God in Jesus can only shout out, "Crucify him!" The people who prayed for the return of the Lord to his temple, turned their eyes away when he did return and demanded his death. They were so mired in darkness that they couldn't bear the light.

And yet the love of God marched sovereignly on—to the cross. At the end of the sixth day in Genesis, God finished his work and now on

this sixth day in John's Gospel we hear Jesus announce that "It is finished" as he takes his last breath. It was finished. His work was accomplished. Humanity was forgiven and creation was healed. Evil had risen to its full height, giving the love of God the opportunity to rise even higher on the cross. Of course, no one understood that on Friday. It would take the resurrection, in which Jesus was vindicated by his Father, in which victory was brought out into the light for everyone to see, it would take that before they would know and understand and believe. But on the cross, as Jesus breathed his last and slumped, hanging on those nails, it was finished. Once and for all. A full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of Israel, for the sins of all of the nations—for the sins of the whole world. A sacrifice that would finally heal the breach and bring an answer to our prayer: on earth as it is in heaven.

And now, Brothers and Sisters, you and I stand gathered at the foot of the cross, confronted by the very image of God and by his amazing love. Here is the man who represents what we were created to be in the beginning and what, if we will only commit ourselves to him, God will make us to be. Here is our King, who has inaugurated his kingdom—this new creation, this world set to rights, a world founded on love—and not the world's idea of love, but the love defined by the story of God and his people and by Jesus' sacrifice for us on the cross. Here we're confronted by the King and his kingdom and by a vision of the world set to rights. What will we do? We are so often stuck in the kingdom of Caesar. We put our trust in Caesar's sword and in

Caesar's coins—even in Caesar's gods. Like those Sadducee priests who were so dead set on holding on to what they had, that they declared the unthinkable, that they declared the very thing they knew so well was false: We have no king but Caesar. And John reminds us today that whatever power Caesar may have, has been given to him by God and to fulfil his purposes, not Caesar's. Brothers and Sisters, let go of Caesar and take hold of Jesus. Let go everything else and take hold of the love of God made manifest at the cross.

Good Friday reminds us. We look up to the cross and we see Jesus. Behold the man. Behold the king. He is the image of God and as we look in his face we see the God who loved his people, who loved the world so much, that he gave his own son that we might be forgiven and set to rights and welcomed back into his fellowship—who sent his son not to condemn, but to save. Here is the good shepherd who lays down his own life for his sheep out of love. Here is the one who shows the greatest love we can ever know as he lays down his life for his friends. Jesus, having loved his own who were in the world, loved them to the uttermost. This love we see at the cross is the very love that shone so brightly out of the darkness at the very moment when we thought the light had been overcome. This is the love that redeems and renews us, but even more important than that, this is the love that glorifies the God who is love.

And so, Brothers and Sisters, this Good Friday, be transformed by this love. Our brother and our king has given his life and by that love he give us life and hope and a lens

through which we should, more and more each day, see every part of our lives and of the world. This is the love that forgives our sins and heals our hurts. This is the love that is making creation new and that, one day, will wipe away our tears. This is the love that we, as Jesus' people, manifest to the world. This is the truth we witness for the sake of the world and to the glory of God.