

Ash Wednesday/Midweek 1

It Is Hidden in the Savior's Solitude

Text: Luke 18:31-34

- I. It is our greatest sorrow that we cannot help him.
 - A. We would like to help him a little or perhaps at least rewrite the script.
 - B. Not only can we not help him; we caused all of his sorrow in the first place.
 - C. The greatest crime of all is imagining that we either could help or even have helped him in his passion.
- II. It is our greatest joy that we cannot help him.
 - A. He relieves our sorrow by willingly doing it all.
 - B. That he alone has carried his cross is our whole comfort and confidence.

Our Lenten journey this year begins as did the Lenten journey of Jesus and his disciples so many years ago. We hear Jesus' call to go with him up to Jerusalem and up to the cross of the first Lent in Luke 18:31-34:

Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again." The disciples did not understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about.

I.

In Jesus' call to us on Ash Wednesday, he gives us a bloodcurdling preview of what we are about to see in this great drama of Lent. It is horrible in the extreme. And it is shocking. The Creator of the universe will be mocked and insulted? How can that be? The one who gave us breath at birth will be beaten within an inch of his life? Is that possible? He who is the author of every good and perfect gift that we have ever had since we were born, he will be cruelly tormented and then shamefully executed? His glory is hidden, hidden completely in the cross.

Do you perhaps wish that you had been there? Does this thought spring to mind: "Ah, Lord Jesus, if only you could have taken me along! Maybe I could have helped you. Maybe I could have wiped your face with a cool towel. Maybe I could have yelled to the crowds that all you were doing was for their salvation. Maybe I could have been at least one defense witness for you at the court of the high priest or at your trial before Pontius Pilate. Maybe I could have done something, just some little thing, to lighten your burden,

to show my love and gratitude for what you were doing for me, even for me.” Don’t you want to say that to him as he begins again his journey to the cross in Lent?

Jesus takes us aside with the Twelve and announces to us, “We are going up to Jerusalem.” And we want to heed his call. We want to respond by following after him as he marches to the cross. And it is our greatest sorrow that we cannot help him in all that he is about to do for us and for our salvation. The Twelve could not help him either. But exactly that is the glory hidden in the coming cross. Jesus makes that clear already in his call to the disciples to join him on his final journey to the holy city. For he tells them, “We are going up to Jerusalem.” But after that one little word, we, the subject of the sentence changes. He does not say, “We are going up, and we will suffer.” No. We are going up. But it is Jesus alone who will suffer there in the way that he describes. The Son of Man will fulfill the Scriptures. The Son of Man will be mocked, will be insulted, will be spit upon and flogged and killed. All who follow him to the cross, his first disciples and we along with them, can therefore only be spectators at this great drama that is about to unfold. His glory is that he alone is the Savior. His glory hidden in the horrible solitude of all he suffered is that our salvation should be entirely the gift that comes through his cross and his alone.

We go up to Jerusalem. But Jesus will suffer there, and he will suffer alone. But still, don’t you want to be like Peter and at least take him aside to rewrite the script? Don’t you want to say to him on Ash Wednesday, “No, Lord Jesus! That’s not the way it should be! If we cannot help you, at least let us see you go up there in triumph. Let us see you as you were on the Mount of Transfiguration. Let us see you with your robes as white as snow and your face shining like the sun. Let us see you talking with the holy prophets of old. But not this way! Not in shame and disgrace. If you must suffer, then let the suffering at least be hidden from view. For no one wants their shame and disgrace put on public display. We should hide that from view. How can we endure to see you that way: covered with spit, black and blue with bruises, washed in blood? No, no, that will never do. Let us see you in glory and in triumph. At the very least, let us and all the world be spectators at the triumph of your resurrection.”

But if we said that to Jesus, he would surely turn and sharply rebuke us, as he did with Peter when he expressed similar sentiments. This is the way it must be, Jesus would tell us. For he is going to fulfill the Scriptures, to fulfill all that was written about him in the Old Testament. Nothing will soften the blows. Nothing will relieve the pain. No one will help him. And it all has to be done in broad daylight, in public, so that all will see the shame and disgrace. We would have hidden the shame of his passion and put the glory of his resurrection on display. But Jesus will have none of that. All will see his shame. No one will view the glory of the resurrection. That will be hidden and made known not by sight but by his Word and his presence in the Word and the testimony of the few who saw him after that glorious event.

Oh, what sadness that we cannot help him whom we love and adore! Yes, what a disgrace for the whole human race that no one helped him bear the burden of the whole world’s sin, not his mother, not the Twelve, not the church or the state; no one helped him. To be sure, the angels served him for a moment. They served him in Gethsemane. But while he is enduring what he told us would happen during his trial and execution, even the angels are nowhere to be told. After Gethsemane they do not appear again until Easter Sunday.

But there is more. Jesus refuses Peter's advice and our suggestions that the script should be rewritten. And he arranges things in such a way that the Twelve cannot help him in his suffering, and we cannot either. But there is still more to it than that. We not only do not help him in his agony. We caused it all in the first place. From beginning to end, all that he has said that he will do on this journey he is doing in our place, in our stead, on our behalf. Was he despised and rejected? We should have been. Was he left alone with no help in the hour of pain and sorrow? We should be. Did even his Father abandon him at the crucial moment on the cross so that in the midst of life he was suffering the torments of the damned in hell? That was our lot. We were conceived and born deserving that. We have turned aside from his Word and sinned every day so that we deserve his suffering for all time and for eternity too. And truth be told, we didn't even care that our sins would bring him to such suffering, such abuse, such a death. How many times in a day do we turn aside from him without even thinking and refuse even to go up with him to Jerusalem? We have better things to do. We have our minds and hearts fixed not on him but on our own pleasure and convenience. It is easier to watch television than to pray. It is more convenient to love gossip or the lusts of the flesh than his cross. For family bickering, there is always time. For his Word and a family devotion, well, perhaps later. It is time now for the sports page, not for a page in the Bible.

And it gets worse still. We imagine in our total wickedness and depravity that we are not totally wicked and depraved. We think that we really don't deserve what he endured; and we yawn or are maybe even irritated when someone points it out, especially during Lent. We vainly assume that somehow or other there is at least a scrap of merit in us for which we should not have to suffer and for which he should therefore not have had to suffer either. So foolish are we, to put it another way, that we imagine there is some good in us that does not require his journey to the cross. It's just another way of saying that deep down inside we think we have actually helped him somehow, at least once in a while, at least sometime or other. That's the greatest sin of all and the one we are least likely to recognize, much less confess. It is the sin of arrogance. It is the sin of thinking that at least a little bit in us needs no forgiveness and, yes, is even deserving of some eternal reward.

But in Jerusalem Jesus suffered for everything that we are and have been when we did not perfectly love God and serve him with all of our hearts, all of our minds, all of our strength. And when was that? Every moment of our lives!

II.

So our sorrow deepens. For we go up to Jerusalem, up to the cross with him in Lent. But don't follow too closely, as if you were going to somehow be of help to him in his sorrow. For, again, we can do nothing to help him. All that we have done only adds to his sorrow, his pain, his suffering, his death. We are the cause even on our best days, even in our best works; for they are never perfect. We are his curse. And so we go up there with him, following him at a distance, as he carries his cross all alone. It is Jesus who must suffer and die. He, and he alone, must do it all, or we are doomed and damned. Just think of it! If he had required our help in order to accomplish our redemption, we would only have ruined it. For our work is, on its best day, stained by sin. Sinners—that's what we

are. We cannot, therefore, do anything at all that does not carry the stench of sin, the smell of death, the sulfur of hell on it. We go up with him. But he must do it all, or we are lost. That is the glory hidden in the solitude of the cross, the solitude that Jesus must do it alone or we must perish.

Nothing will deliver him from the anguish that is his in the loneliness, the solitude, of his Lenten cross. Who will deliver us from ours? For as we follow Jesus up to Jerusalem in response to his call, we are like worms wriggling on the end of a hook. He has invited us to see what we did to him. He has called us to observe what we deserved. Who will deliver us from our sorrow in Lent? HE WILL! HE DOES! For as it is our greatest sorrow that we cannot help him in Lent, so too that is our greatest joy in Lent. Yes, it is our peace, our life, our salvation. Listen to him in his call to us to go up with him to Jerusalem. There is not one word of complaint that falls from his lips. There is not the least trace of bitterness or anger in his tone. He does not accuse us as we deserve. He does not shame us as we might expect. No, none of that. He alone will suffer, and he will suffer alone. And that is exactly the way he wants it to be. His march to Jerusalem is a march of doom for him but of triumph for us. It is defeat and death for him but a victory parade for us. His face is set with determination to do all that needs to be done to fulfill the Scriptures for us. His will is like iron and cannot be bent to turn him away from his purpose of paying the price of our wickedness and our total depravity. So full, so perfect, so complete is his love for us. So full, so perfect, so complete is his yearning for our salvation. He wants to do it! He not only does not need our help; he does not want it either! Every pore, every fiber of his being strains and stretches on the way to the cross and on the cross to accomplish our salvation. Without our aid, he made us. Without our aid, he redeems us too.

Oh, then let us go up to Jerusalem with him! Let us follow him in Lent, but not too closely as though we would help him. Let us go up with him and follow to the cross. Let us be filled with sorrow for our sin that caused it all. But then let us be filled with joy beyond all sorrow, that he did it all and he did it alone. Let us watch with him awhile and see how great his love is for us, how perfect his solitude for us, how complete his atoning sacrifice for us. For that is the glory hidden on the cross, the glory that he wanted and won, the glory of redeeming us by his work there. Let us watch and keep watching until we hear the victory cry: HE IS RISEN! HE IS RISEN INDEED! Amen.