



A Disappointing God

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field
The Fifth Sunday in Lent~March 25, 2018*

Isaiah 50:4-9a

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. The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. 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. The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty?

Psalms 118:1-2, 19-29

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| 1 Give thanks to the God who is good; *
God's mercy endures for ever. | and it is marvelous in our eyes. |
| 2 Let Israel now proclaim, *
"God's mercy endures for ever." | 24 On this day the Holy One has acted; *
we will rejoice and be glad in it. |
| 19 Open for me the gates of righteousness; *
I will enter them;
I will offer thanks to God. | 25 Hosannah, God, hosannah! *
O Holy One, send us now success. |
| 20 "This is the gate of the Holy One; *
those who are righteous may enter." | 26 Blest is the one who comes in the name of the God; *
we bless you from the house of God. |
| 21 I will give thanks to you, for you answered me *
and have become my salvation. | 27 God is the Holy One; who shined upon us; *
form a procession with branches up to the horns of the
altar. |
| 22 The same stone which the builders rejected *
has become the chief cornerstone. | 28 "You are my God, and I will thank you; *
you are my God, and I will exalt you." |
| 23 This is God's doing, * | 29 Give thanks to God who is good; *
God's mercy endures for ever. |

Mark 14:1—15:47

It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus[a] by stealth and kill him; for they said, "Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people." While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. But some were there who said to one another in anger, "Why was the ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii,[c] and the money given to the poor." And they scolded her. But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news[d] is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. When they heard it, they were greatly pleased, and promised to give him money. So he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed, his disciples said to him, "Where do you

want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?" So he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, 'The Teacher asks, Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there." So the disciples set out and went to the city, and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal.

When it was evening, he came with the twelve. And when they had taken their places and were eating, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me." They began to be distressed and to say to him one after another, "Surely, not I?" He said to them, "It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the bowl with me. For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born."

While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, "This is my blood of the [g] covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."

When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. And Jesus said to them, "You will all become deserters; for it is written,

'I will strike the shepherd,
and the sheep will be scattered.'

But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." Peter said to him, "Even though all become deserters, I will not." Jesus said to him, "Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times." But he said vehemently, "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you." And all of them said the same.

They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. And he said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake." And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want." He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; [i] the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to say to him. He came a third time and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand."

Immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; and with him there was a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard." So when he came, he went up to him at once and said, "Rabbi!" and kissed him. Then they laid hands on him and arrested him. But one of those who stood near drew his sword and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to them, "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But let the scriptures be fulfilled." All of them deserted him and fled.

A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked.

They took Jesus to the high priest; and all the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes were assembled. Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest; and he was sitting with the guards, warming himself at the fire. Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for testimony against Jesus to put him to death; but they found none. For many gave false testimony against him, and their testimony did not agree. 57 Some stood up and gave false testimony against him, saying, "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.'" But even on this point their testimony did not agree. Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, "Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?" But he was silent and did not answer. Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, [j] the Son of the Blessed One?" Jesus said, "I am; and

'you will see the Son of Man
seated at the right hand of the Power,
and 'coming with the clouds of heaven.'"

Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "Why do we still need witnesses? You have heard his blasphemy! What is your decision?" All of them condemned him as deserving death. Some began to spit on him, to blindfold him, and to strike him, saying to him, "Prophecy!" The guards also took him over and beat him.

While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest came by. When she saw Peter

warming himself, she stared at him and said, "You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth." But he denied it, saying, "I do not know or understand what you are talking about." And he went out into the forecourt.[k] Then the cock crowed. And the servant-girl, on seeing him, began again to say to the bystanders, "This man is one of them." But again he denied it. Then after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, "Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean." But he began to curse, and he swore an oath, "I do not know this man you are talking about." At that moment the cock crowed for the second time. Then Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, "Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times." And he broke down and wept.

As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" He answered him, "You say so." Then the chief priests accused him of many things. Pilate asked him again, "Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you." But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.

Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. Then he answered them, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. Pilate spoke to them again, "Then what do you wish me to do[a] with the man you call[b] the King of the Jews?" They shouted back, "Crucify him!" Pilate asked them, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him!" So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort. And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. And they began saluting him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus. Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.

It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. The inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews." And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!" In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah,[g] the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land[h] until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah." And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.

When evening had come, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate wondered if he were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he had been dead for some time. When he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph. Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body,[m] wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body was laid.

Jerusalem is packed—jammed with millions of people. The rumors about Jesus have preceded him. “Have you heard? A king named Jesus is going to come into Jerusalem and overthrow the Romans. I even heard he is the promised one- the Messiah. God is finally going to rescue us—just like God did in Egypt. I can’t wait to see the look on Pilate’s face as he gets sent packing by this Jesus.” Then the crowd begins to chant; “Hosanna, hosanna to the Son of David”. “Hosanna to our impending rule- hosanna to peace and freedom and justice, done our way”. The crowd is packed in so tightly no one can move. And then he appears. And a ripple goes through the crowd. ripple of anticipation followed by recognition followed by—confusion. “Something’s not right here. That looks like Jesus, but why is he riding a donkey rather than a stallion? Doesn’t he know that the donkey is what princes ride to show they are unarmed and coming in peace? I thought he was going to lead a revolution and overthrow Rome. This is a disappointing beginning”. And then he gets off the donkey. The crowd goes silent—waiting, wondering what he is going to do now. He walks into the Temple. And they look at each other, nod, and say “maybe now he is going to make the Temple fall down like he said.” Anticipation hangs in the air. But Jesus? He walks into the Temple, looks around, comes back out, gets onto his donkey and says to his disciples, “Let’s go to Bethany.” And leaves. Leaves. Just like that. The crowd falls completely silent. And then a murmur runs through the crowd as someone names out loud what they are all starting to think; “this Jesus is a dud. He hasn’t done anything for us at all. What kind of king is he?” And they grow angrier and angrier. And quietly at first, then more insistently, cries of “crucify him” fill the air. And then, well, we know what happens from here.

What went wrong? What was the crowd so upset about? Had God tricked them, us, with some kind of false promise? No, I think what happened is a fairly simple case of misunderstanding. And it is just a short step from misunderstanding to disappointment to anger.

This is not new—God consistently disappoints us—mostly because, at heart, we are more interested in what we want God to be than in who God is. We do a marvelous job of projecting our own wants, needs and desires onto God. Why didn’t I get that job, God—what’s wrong with you? Why did my friend get cancer, why did you let that happen God, what’s wrong with you? Why did my loved one die—if you had been here he wouldn’t have died, what’s wrong with you? Don’t you care at all? Why do you so consistently disappoint me? We want God to be a talisman-the One who protects us from bad things and when that doesn’t pan out, we are disappointed-and angry.

But in a strange way misunderstanding and disappointment may be the beginnings of salvation for us. Each time one of our neat, comfortable, self-serving illusions about God, one of our misinterpretations of God’s promise, drops away and we are surprised and disappointed, each time we let go of one of our idols, we make a little more room for the reality of God, for the power and truth of God’s promise. Disappointed, we can let go of our requirements of God and begin to see God as God is. Disappointed, we can turn away from the God who was supposed to be in order to seek the God who is.

What God is, is surprising, and this is intimately linked to God’s disappointing qualities—always doing the unexpected and quietly or not so quietly turning the world upside down. Jesus carefully planned and engineered entrance into Jerusalem, for example, designed to parody worldly understandings of power, was surprising, even subversive. Jesus took the knowledge of the world, our knowledge, turned it on its head and exposed it for what it is—mostly self-serving and fear driven. Most surprising, subversive, and if we’re honest more than a little disappointing, is the cross- that brutal, violent instrument of torture and execution that appears to trumpet the triumph of the ways of the world. We know, of course, the end of the story. And it is tempting to head right for it, skip this week and head straight to the empty tomb. But to do so would be to wallow in our notions of God, notions that will ultimately disappoint us, cheat us of intimate knowledge of the real power and promise of God. Because the promise includes the circus of today and the agony and abandonment of Good Friday. The promise is that God is present with the totality of our lives. Present with those who go from “hosanna” to “crucify him” in a split second. Present with those who turn away from him or worse, betray him—as did Judas, as do we. The promise is of a death-defying love which refuses to give up or let go. And it is not a promise which says “life is all about glory—stick with me and life will be grand”. We misunderstand God’s promise—thinking of it as protection against misfortune. We think the promise is that if we hunker down and protect our lives-set ourselves up for minimal damage and disappointment, then God will reward us in the next life. And, in a way, that would be nice. Because life is sometimes hard, unpredictable, cruel and most definitely unfair. Jesus tells us “believing in me, following me will not change that. Following me will help you see the world in a different way. It will help you see what real triumph is all about. It will help you see what real power looks like. It will help you see what real love looks like. It will help you see that there is nothing that will separate you from me—that even death will not win in the end”. But we can only see, only know what this looks like if we are willing to take some risks, to walk this

week with Jesus. If we are willing to really know that the fulfillment of God's promise always involves struggle and suffering, discipline and death. If we are willing to walk into the upper room on Thursday and share his last meal with his friends, walk with him to the Sanhedrin and then to Pilate's palace, walk with him up a lonely hill and wait with him. Watch. Watch what is horrifically difficult to see and what we don't understand, and likely never fully will. The truth is that life is messy and at times painful. And if we are to be open to the joy of life we must also experience the pain of life. Yes, we can try to play it safe, to hang onto a God who won't disappoint us, to avoid suffering. We can stay sort of safe and insulated, and numb and cut off from life. We have that choice. But this week especially I encourage you, I urge you, for God's sake, let go, open yourself up, and enter into this awful, wonderful, death defying story.