

Prophet Priest & King

Good Friday

By Tony Buford

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CrossPointe Community Church
4803 N. St. Joseph Ave.
St. Joseph, MO 64505

Website: stjoecrosspointe.com/
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/stjoegrace

The Prophet stood looking from the Mount of Olives across the Kidron Valley toward the city of Jerusalem, sitting on Mount Zion like a jewel in its setting. He was surrounded by the joyous noise of pilgrims, many like himself from Galilee with their country dialect and their provincial ways. They were singing the Songs of Ascent as they walked on well-worn paths, moving steadily upward toward their destination. Where he stood, fathers would grab their children and hoist them upward to sit on their shoulders. "Children, do you see it? That's Jerusalem. This is the mountain where our father Abraham prepared to sacrifice his son, Isaac. This is where the great King David conquered the Jebusites and made his royal home. This is where his son, Solomon, built the temple, a building that was so grand that people came from all over the world to see it. Listen, can you hear it, the noise of thousands of people who are there in its narrow streets? Come on, we're going to follow this path down through the olive trees and across that brook and then upward to the gates of the city."

It was a striking contrast. On one hand there were the joyous sounds of Hebrew voices, "Come, bless the Lord all you servants of the Lord who stand by night in the house of the Lord! Lift your hands to the holy place and bless the Lord! May the Lord bless you from Zion, he who made heaven and earth!" As children ran and skipped ahead of their parents, adult voices would sing, "Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb, a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them. He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate." But there the Prophet stood, set in bold relief against the scenes of such joy. His face was etched in sorrow. As Isaiah would say of him, he was a man of sorrow and acquainted with grief.

His disciples stopped. They noted the sad demeanor of their Lord. Gone was the joy that so often marked their times together. He wasn't making them smile with images of camels and needles, or surgeons taking out splinters with logs sticking out of their own eyes. No, he was unusually quiet. His mind was elsewhere. That was something otherworldly about his gaze. He was with them but he seemed to be in another place and another time. Years later as the physician, Luke, inquired about this day from those who were with him, he would be told that when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it.

Was there ever a more dangerous vocation among God's people than that of a prophet? The story of Israel and God's prophets is a sordid tale of beatings, imprisonments, and even murder. We don't like God's message much when it indicts our favorite sins and, of course, that was the role of a prophet to prosecute God's case against a rebellious and idolatrous nation. It was hard and dangerous work. I can't imagine that any mother in Israel would ever relish the idea that her son would be called to such an unpopular and perilous vocation. A later Christian writer would put it this way, "The prophets," he wrote, "suffered mocking and flogging and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned. They were sawn in two. They were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats. Destitute. Afflicted. Mistreated. Of whom the world was not worthy. Wandering about in deserts and mountains and in dens and caves of the earth."

In the week ahead of him, Jesus would do things that prophets did. He would walk into a temple and overturn tables. He would drive out merchants and proclaim that God's word declared, "My house shall be called a house of prayer but you have made it a den of thieves." He would deliver oracles of judgment, six in all, against the religious leaders of Israel. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces, for you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. Woe to you, blind guides who say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it's nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold in the temple, he is bound by his oath.' Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you are like whitewashed tombs which outwardly appear beautiful but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous saying, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of them you will kill and crucify and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth from the blood of the righteous Abel, to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation."

Yes, in the week that is ahead of him, he would say these things and more, but today he stands on the Mount of Olives and he looks at Jerusalem with eyes filled with tears for he is looking with the eyes of a prophet, a seer who is seeing terrible things. He is seeing this city, Jerusalem, not as she is on this day but as she will be shortly, less than 40 years from now, less than a generation. What he sees is smoke rising from a city that is set on fire. He hears the anguished cries of women who are being raped and tortured. He looks and what he sees is the emaciated body of people who have been starved into submission, a people so desperate for food that they have resorted to cannibalism. He sees the crimson and gold flags of an empire that is ruthlessly putting down a rebellion with merciless efficiency.

As he stands there, while children play around him, tugging on the arms of their parents, urging them to hurry onward to the city, the last and greatest of God's prophets speaks. "O, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it, how often I would have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you would not. See, your house is left you desolate. Would that you, even you had known for the things that make for peace but now they are hidden from your eyes. A day will come upon you when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you, because you did not know the time of your visitation."

On Thursday evening, the great High Priest begins his ministrations but he isn't standing in front of an altar. No, that sacrifice that he will make is still a few hours away. Right now, he is doing his other important priestly work, the work of intercession. You see, if the primary role of a prophet was to represent God before the people, the primary work of the priest was to represent the people before God. He was their proxy. He was their substitute. He stood with a proximity to God that was not allowed to anyone else. While the people of Israel would gather outside the walls of the tabernacle and later the temple, the High Priest would enter into the most holy place and stand before the Ark of the Covenant and the Mercy Seat that stood above it. He would take blood and he would sprinkle it over that Mercy Seat, standing as a representative for sinners symbolically asking that Yahweh might cover their sin for another year. His work was never done. There were always sinners to atone for. There was always a sacrifice to be made. There was another year that was coming. Turtledoves, lambs, bulls, the work of the High Priest was continual.

It is a sad fact that many of Israel's priests were corrupt, including the sons of Eli and Samuel and, of course, many many others. God, through the prophet Ezekiel, declares his disgust over the corruption of the priesthood with an oracle. "Ah," God says, "shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves, should not the shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened. The sick you have not healed. The injured you have not bound up. The strayed you have not brought back. The lost, you have not sought. And with force and harshness, you have ruled them."

The corruption of the priests extended into the first century A.D. It might surprise you to know that people engaged in religious work are not always believers themselves. That was true of the chief priests assembled together in Jerusalem during this week. They were Sadducees, a sect known for their lack of belief. They didn't believe in miracles. They didn't believe in the supernatural. They didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead. They didn't believe in angelic powers. If you asked why anyone that is basically an unbeliever would make the priesthood a profession, the answer, of course, lies in the oracle of Ezekiel: it was a position of power and prestige and it led to wealth. And it is those corrupt priests who have now conspired with Judas and the rest of the Sanhedrin to kill Jesus, irreligious men committed to an unethical conspiracy to perpetrate an immoral murder. Israel, indeed the entire world, needs a better representative to stand before God than them, and he is in Jerusalem on Thursday night.

While those priests were plotting his death, he was doing the real work of a High Priest. There in the Upper Room, he has gathered his disciples to prepare them for his death. What we call the Upper Room Discourse is Jesus' final will and testament. He tenderly comforts them with the promise of the Spirit and his eventual return, "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. If I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again to take you to myself that where I am, you also may be." He warns them, "They will put you out of the synagogues, indeed the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God." He encourages them, "You will weep and lament but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful but then your sorrow will be turned to joy." But the most important thing that he does there in the Upper Room as our great High Priest, is that he prays. He makes intercession. In fact, we call it his High Priestly Prayer. Of course, because he is God's greatest and last High Priest, intercession has been a constant part of his life. He doesn't wait until the last week of his life to pray for his disciples, he has already been praying for his people.

It's there in the Upper Room that Jesus scandalizes them with the announcement that one of them would betray him to his enemies. This sets off a long discussion among the disciples sitting around the table, "Is it me, Lord? Is it I? Who is this?" There is one disciple who is certain that it could not be him. Peter speaks up and objects, "Though they all fall away because of you, Lord, not me. I will never fall away." And Jesus looks at him and says, "Simon, Simon, Satan has demanded to have all of you but I have prayed for you all. And Peter, when you are recovered, turn and strengthen your brothers." That night, of course, Peter would fall not once, not twice, but three times, and yet in just a couple of days, he will be recovered in answer to this intercessory prayer that our Lord has made for him.

So the faithful High Priest, the Good Shepherd, not like the shepherds of Ezekiel's oracle, prays for his flock. He thinks of them in the world after he leaves. He yearns for their welfare. He asks for their protection. In John 17, in this great intercessory prayer, these are the words which the Lord speaks and prays. He says, "I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one." That's a good shepherd. That's a great high priest.

But remarkably, he doesn't just pray for the 12, the 11 that are gathered around him. Do you know that on this night, Thursday night, just before Good Friday, he thinks of you, those that would come after him, and he prays and this is what he says, "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given

to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world." How is it that you are preserved through every danger and trial? How is it that you are recovered from every sin that you commit? It is that you have a great High Priest who intercedes continually for you and he is heard.

Dressed in his royal purple robe and wearing a crown, the King stood in Pilate's headquarters. The Roman governor looked him over. He was a bloody mess. His back had been flayed by Roman soldiers who were experts at torture. They wielded their whips with cruel and savage expertise. They took turns taunting him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" Their hands flew quickly from their sides toward his face, pummeling it until it was bruised and swollen. Pilate had given them free reign and they were enjoying every minute of it.

They despised these Jews and their culture. They were always astonished at the hubris of these subjugated people toward their captors. They saw the disdain in their eyes toward Rome. They heard the slurs, "Dogs. Pagans. Unclean." So now that they had one who claimed to be their King, they relished the opportunity to demonstrate the merciless nature of Roman justice.

For Pilate's part, he was taking half measures. He had no interest in crucifying a man that he knew to be innocent. "Maybe," he thought, "if I beat this Jesus, the Jewish leadership will be satisfied. Maybe if they look at him after my soldiers have had an hour with him, they will let him go of this ridiculous charge that we all know is not worthy of death."

Pilate had come to this conviction that Jesus was not guilty of the seditious crimes leveled at him by Annas and Caiaphas. He had spent some extended time interrogating him, "So, are you the King of the Jews?" That's what he asked him. That was one of the accusations of the Jews. "Well, are you?" Jesus looked up at him and replied with a question, "Do you say this of your own accord or do others say it about me?"

The question surprised Pilate. He was used to seeing two types of people before him: the hardened criminal who was determined to show no fear before the Roman magistrate; and the new convict who found himself facing brutal Roman justice and was paralyzed with fear. But this man in front of him was neither.

"So, you're going to play cat and mouse with me?" Pilate thought to himself. "I ask a question and you answer with a question. The interrogator becomes the interrogated. Alright, I'll play along. Am I a Jew?" The words dripped with all the derision he could muster. "Your own nation and chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?" Calmly and clearly, Jesus looks the governor in the eye with a confidence that unsettled Pilate. "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting that I might not be delivered over to the Jews, but my kingdom is not of this world."

"Now that's clever," Pilate thought. "He admits the charge but he denies he's a threat to Rome. So what am I to do with you, Jesus of Nazareth? You don't appear to be one of these crazy Jewish nationalists who fancy themselves a new Judas Maccabeus, and yet here you are, a poor Galilean who claims to be Israel's King. Alright, let's try this again. So you are a King?" Jesus answered, "You say that I'm a King. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone, Pilate, who listens is of the truth, listens to my voice."

Pilate is both amused and growing impatient. He feels intuitively that he's being placed in a difficult position. Whatever Jesus is, whatever crimes he may have committed against his religious leaders, he's not deserving of death. And yet Pilate is caught between the expectations of Rome to keep the peace in this God-forsaken place, and the demands of the Sanhedrin to execute Jesus. The time in Palestine has wearied him. He knows he's being used and he doesn't like it, and this man in front of him refuses to take the exit he has offered.

Pilate thinks to himself, "Just admit you're no King. But no, instead you're going to talk about truth." Pilate, the career politician, jaded and cynical and pragmatic, looks at Jesus and he says to him, "What's truth?"

He goes outside to meet with the Jewish leadership. He thinks to himself, "These despicable self-righteous people won't even enter my home because they don't want to be defiled, and yet they want me to do them a favor. Well, I'm not in the mood for favors, at least not yet."

He offers Barabbas in exchange for Jesus. They choose Barabbas. He turns Jesus over to the soldiers to beat him. They're still not satisfied. He demands that they crucify him, even as he knows they have no authority to do so. They respond by turning up the heat. "He claims to be the Son of God." This frightens Pilate. "If you release this man, you are no friend of Caesar's." Pilate is quickly moving out of options. Those are exactly the kind of words that could cost him dearly should the Emperor hear of them, and while he continues to try to find a way to release Jesus, he cannot overcome the relentless arguments of the Jewish leadership.

"Everyone who makes himself a King opposes Caesar." Now they were no longer accusing Jesus, they were making veiled threats toward Pilate, but he's still a proud man and he doesn't like being dictated to by these Jews. In anger he asks, "Shall I crucify your King," and in one voice the Jews reply, "We have no King but Caesar!"

There it is. Pilate is out of options. He has no choice and so he turns over Jesus to his soldiers and commands them to kill the King of the Jews. He hangs on a cross with a placard over his head written in three languages, Aramaic, Latin and Greek, "The King of the Jews."

And at 3 o'clock on the afternoon on Good Friday, the body of Jesus of Nazareth hangs limp and lifeless on a Roman cross. The Prophet has been silenced. The Priest will never again offer a sacrifice. And the King dies at the hands of a third-rate governor in a backwater province of the Roman Empire. And we call that Friday good. How can it be?

The reason why it is a good Friday is because we know the rest of the story. Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son whom he has appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God. He is the exact imprint of his nature and he upholds the universe by his power. And after, as a priest making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on High, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. It is of the Son that God says, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. The scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom. Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet."

The Prophet has spoken. The Priest has offered the greatest sacrifice imaginable. And today, the door is opened to enter into his kingdom and I wonder, I wonder if there is someone today who is here who has heard these words, who will look back on this night and think of it not as a good Friday, but as the best Friday ever because on that night, the Lord Jesus opened your heart to receive Prophet, Priest and King.

Let's pray.

Our dear Father, on this night when we commemorate the work that you have done for us in your Son, for the love that sent him, for the justice that was met, and for the mercy that is now dispensed, we praise you. And we ask, O Lord, that not one person in this room will miss the message of Good Friday; that they will look to Christ and Christ alone as the sole and sufficient Savior and embrace him through faith. For this we pray in his name. Amen.