

*Meeting the People of Passion Week, Pt. 1*  
***Enter the Drama***  
*Matthew 21: 25-32*

**First Presbyterian Church  
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For several years now, on the Thursday before Easter, we finish our service and go into the church garden. We stand by the tomb and sing the question, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” The event happened two millennia ago in a land far across the sea. It occurred amidst people who spoke a language very few of us today can understand. How could *we* possibly have been there? But still we sing the answer, “Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.” The distant story moves us still. Convicts us. Gathers us up. Changes us. Because it’s not just ancient history. The unbroken witness of the people who belong to Jesus is that *we are included* in his passion and resurrection!

Each of the four Gospels devote nearly a third of their content just to the eight days we call Passion Week, the time from Jesus’ triumphal entry on Palm Sunday to his resurrection on Easter. His whole ministry becomes concentrated in this week in Jerusalem. It has all come down to this. Here we see most clearly who Jesus is. Here we see most starkly the human reaction to Jesus the Son of God who came to love and save us. We see acts of humble, sacrificial devotion. We see acts of foul betrayal. We encounter embarrassing denials and beautiful gestures. Through the parables he told during Passion Week, we hear Jesus describe the various ways people respond to him. We see his bravery as he engages the questions and accusations of the earthly authorities. Passion Week provides a window into the heart of Jesus and the hearts of those who encountered Jesus on his mission to save the world. As such, it provides a window on our hearts as well.

I have precious memories of an Easter afternoon when my father took me to see a Passion Play at the Orange Bowl Stadium in Miami. The field had become a stage on which the events of Jesus’ final week were enacted before the great crowd. Passion plays, of course, are a great and ancient Christian tradition around the world. For Passion Week is high drama. This is the climax of Jesus’ life among us. Every encounter is charged with significance. Every person who takes the stage has an eternally important role to play. Every line spoken remains inestimably important to us.

So this Lent, I'm inviting you to consider the characters the Gospels record as part of Passion Week as actors in a play. The script contains the drama of our redemption. As in any play, there is a protagonist, a hero, who of course is Jesus. There are also antagonists, both spiritual and human. There are mixed characters, the ones most like us, who can be faithful in one moment and faithless in the next.

By way of introduction, I'd like to set up your first week of readings by considering the important characters who are "off stage" during this drama, but who nevertheless play a crucial role.

Of course, Jesus is the main character on the stage of Passion Week. But he is always oriented toward an invisible character: his heavenly Father. Everything Jesus does and says flows from his ardent, intimate love for him. To understand Jesus, we have to grasp how the Father/Son relationship is at the heart of this story. Jesus never wanted to do anything except to imitate the character of his heavenly Father through his faithful, earthly humanity. There's a wonderful, boy-like feeling to his words, "Whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise." Like Father, like Son. The two are so close that Jesus can say they are one. This love story he tells precedes the foundation of the world! The Father is the character we don't see but who nevertheless is the heart of the play, the magnetic north for Jesus.

The Son of the Father has come to earth on a mission. A Triune mission of love. To redeem the world. Created to be the image-bearers of the God who is love, our first parents fell from grace. They chose their will over God's will. Sin entered the world followed by death. Suffering and chaos were the inevitable consequences. But the Triune God had planned all along to save us. The Father sent the Son in the power of the Spirit to gather us back from death.

In every great story, there is also an antagonist. Someone opposed to the hero achieving his quest. Who was the opposition to Jesus? Of course, it was us! As we know, for the most part, people did not respond positively to Jesus. Many ignored him. Many opposed him. His own chosen people did not bow the knee to their king.

But just as there is an invisible character in the Father driving our redemption, so there is an invisible character driving our resistance. The Biblical story has from the beginning acknowledged the existence of an adversary. We translate the Greek *diabolos* as the devil, which means the slanderer, the one who maligns us. We translate *satanas* as Satan, the adversary, the accuser. The two

words are used interchangeably. Jesus also refers to him as “the evil one” (Matt. 6: 13).

The devil appears as early as Genesis 3 in the guise of the serpent who tempts Eve. There is no explanation given for why God’s good creation has a tempting serpent in the Garden. It’s just the way it is. Scripture gives little information about how Satan came to be or even why he is the way he is. But Scripture is clear from beginning to end that **the** devil and his minions exist.

The evil one drives the organized resistance to Jesus. He fills the religious leaders with self-righteousness. He blinds those who should most welcome Jesus. They see Jesus as a threat. They see our perfect savior as evil, a pestilence to be eliminated. The lies of the evil one drive the opposition that Jesus faces.

In the gospel story, Jesus never shies away from encountering the power or the effect of evil. He constantly exposes darkness and drives it away. In his healings, in his raising the dead, in his teaching, Jesus confronts evil. His response to the threats made against him is, “Bring it on.”

This is not the way I would have enacted the story. When Jack climbs the beanstalk to get the goose that lays the golden eggs, he tip-toes around the sleeping giant. He doesn’t want to confront the giant; he just wants to grab the goose. Bilbo tries not to awaken Smaug the dragon when he sneaks into his lair. That’s because Jack and Bilbo are both trying to steal something. They go to the giant’s castle or the dragon’s lair in order to pilfer. But Jesus is not sneaking. He is not a thief. He’s the owner of the world. The world has fallen under an evil spell. It’s occupied by an enemy. And Jesus has come to reclaim the world and in particular to reclaim his people. Not by stealth. But by the victory of his love.

If Jesus had just played it safe, he could have gotten in and out of Jerusalem at Passover without making a fuss. Even at his trial, with just a bit of finesse, he might have gotten off with a warning. But Jesus strode into the Jerusalem Temple like he owned the place. Because he did. He claimed people like they belonged to him. Because they did. He spoke truth without compromise. He shined light that revealed all the dark corners of the heart, the religious authorities, the politics and the plans of humanity. He fairly asked for the cross.

So at the beginning of Passion Week, we notice Jesus telling parables with a bite. These were not subtle stories. They were obvious. And they were intentionally black and white, in and out, right and wrong. His stories forced his

listeners to a choice. The parable we read this morning provides a good introduction to how Jesus encounters us in the characters of Passion Week.

Jesus begins by asking the religious leaders to make a choice. “What do you think? A man had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ He answered, ‘I will not.’ But afterward he changed his mind and went. The man went to the other son and said the same. He answered, ‘I go sir, but did not go.’ So which of the two did the will of his Father?” Of course they said, “Well, the first son.”

And so Jesus had them. Look, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God ahead of you.” They who had been living lives full of “No” to God changed to Yes. But you, the respectable believers have not received the gospel. Even when you saw what was happening, you wouldn’t change your minds, you wouldn’t swallow your pride. Your outer Yes, was a No in the heart.

His parable was offensive. Sort of like my going to the elders and saying, “By the way, racists and homophobes, jingoists and misogynists, are all reaching heaven ahead of you. Sleeze balls and cheaters have an in with God that you missed! So if you want to be acceptable to God, be more like a sinner than a saint. Find the way that you are the worst, not the best!” That is not how you make friends with the people who give your living!

Jesus spoke in such stark terms that we all immediately start shuffling and shifting. Wait. What about? Do you really mean? He scares us that we have made the wrong choice and can’t get back on the right track. That’s for a reason. So we will wake up, repent, change our minds and change our hearts and cry out for a savior. Don’t let pride and self-sufficiency, or fear and self-protection define you. Get in on the Kingdom by identifying with tax collectors and prostitutes who were willing to bow the knee and seek forgiveness and change.

Of course there are two realities Jesus knows which underlie his story. 1) Very few of us are either one son or the other. The truth is, we’re both. We say Yes and then don’t obey. We say No, and then do change our minds and follow him. And we go back and forth. 2) Very few of us are locked into one category or the other. It’s not too late to change. The compromised and distant may have thought it was too late to be renewed. But Jesus brought them home. His call awoke what was still soft and open and yearning in their hearts. It’s never too late. That’s why he told the story. Not to pronounce final judgment. But to move people to change.

Jesus encountered people with truth so directly that their hearts were exposed. He forced them to make a choice about himself.

The same will be true as we read about the people Jesus met during that week. We'll find ourselves in the heroes and in the villains. We'll be warned not to defy Jesus. We'll be wooed to draw near to him and love him to the end. I hope you will join me in encountering the people of Passion Week over these next 42 days. I pray that as you take up this study, you will grow closer to Jesus so that during Passion Week 2020 you will experience ever more deeply the sorrow and the triumph, the horror and the splendor of the week Jesus gave himself utterly so that we might be saved thoroughly from sin, evil and death.