

**Mark 14:50**

Hope Mennonite Church

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Palm Sunday, Year B

### The Cost of Messiahship

*Then all of them abandoned Jesus and fled (Mark 14:50)*

**The Passion Narrative** is that part of the Gospel devoted to the last week of Jesus' life. The story of that last week takes up about 1/3 each of Matthew, Mark and Luke, and almost half of the Gospel of John. Of all the parts of Jesus' life, the Gospels consider his final days to be, by far, the most important for us to know.

And **Palm Sunday** is like the St. Louis Arch: It's the gateway to the Passion. We call Palm Sunday Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem—a dramatic arrival. He is acclaimed and celebrated by crowds. **And** it's a celebration based on a misunderstanding: Jesus is not what the crowd expects. He's not even what his **disciples** expect. He comes not as a conquering Messiah to destroy the Romans and liberate Jerusalem. To the contrary: He comes as a suffering Messiah to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). Jesus is that self-differentiated, self-defined, suffering Messiah, the One people **don't** expect and can't even imagine. **He** rides on in majesty ... to die!

As gateway to Jesus' Passion, the Palm Sunday misunderstanding creates a strange and poignant paradox, namely, even as Jesus is surrounded by people, he is alone. In fact, Palm Sunday sets in motion a wrenching and wondrous process: Through his last days on Earth, Jesus will be progressively and systematically abandoned. Little by little everyone will, in some way, withdraw from him and leave him alone.

It begins with the crowds. All through his ministry, throngs of curious and needy people, who are captivated by his teaching and healing, spring up wherever Jesus goes. **But** ... in Jerusalem, **the crowds** begin to disperse. From the high point of Palm Sunday, **the crowds** withdraw. In his final

week, Jesus' life goes underground ... or we should say, above ground, because Jesus spends much of it in an upper room with just his *closest friends*.

Yet even these *closest friends*, also begin to *withdraw* from Jesus.

**Judas** leaves the Last Supper. He goes out into the night. He goes out to cut a deal with the religious leaders to betray Jesus.

Then, after the Supper, the remaining eleven disciples walk with Jesus to the Garden of Gethsemane. There Jesus takes Peter and James and John and says to them, "I am deeply grieved and agitated." Jesus' "hour" weighs heavily upon him. He tells them, "Stay here. Watch and pray." Then he goes further alone. He throws himself on the ground. He prays, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible. Remove this cup from me. Yet, not what I want, but what you want" (**Mark 14:36**).

With the weight of the world on his shoulders, Jesus returns to Peter, James and John. He finds them sleeping. It happens three times! Jesus' *closest friends* cannot stay awake with him. They can't help it. They're physically and emotionally exhausted. There's nothing more wearying than intense processes with uncertain outcomes—is there? Nevertheless, the disciples' sleep represents one more hue in the palate of abandoning Jesus. **And** maybe we too know something about *failing at prayer*.

Well then, the party sent out to arrest Jesus arrives. And at that point Mark says this: **All** Jesus' disciples abandoned him and fled.

The arresting party takes Jesus to the house of the high priest. There the Jewish high council meets to consider the charges against him. Jesus appears alone before the council. He has no friends, legal representation, or character witnesses. He is surrounded by hostility: Accusers, false witnesses, and religious leaders who are both jealous of him and afraid of him. Their "investigation,"

which is a travesty of justice, finds him guilty. So, they cover Jesus with a blindfold, saliva, and slaps. These are the **cruel** facts of Jesus' **abandonment**.

Meanwhile, Peter is waiting outside in the courtyard ... waiting to see how things turn out. The courtyard is a semi-public space. People are coming and going. Some are warming themselves by a charcoal fire. In the dim orange glow of that firelight, bystanders **recognize** Peter. They **recognize** him as a **follower** of Jesus. **Three times** they make that positive ID. And **three times** Peter **denies** it. The third time, Peter's **denial** is over-the-top, as he curses and swears an oath against the claim. He disavows any relationship whatsoever with Jesus. He distances himself in the extreme: *I do not know this man about whom you speak.*

Peter's **denial** is full of **irony** ... **irony because** it's both a **lie and the truth**. **It's a lie** because Peter really **is** a follower of Jesus. **It's the truth** because even though he's a follower, Peter **doesn't really know** Jesus ... **doesn't** really understand who Jesus is. Peter's **adamant dissociation** from the Lord is yet another instance of leaving Jesus **abandoned** ... in this case **abandoned** by the very "rock" on which Jesus says he will build his church! More **irony!** Jesus truly walks a lonesome valley, and he walks it **by himself**.

Then Jesus stands **alone** before Pilate the Roman governor. Pilate knows all about the politics and jealousy and self-interested dynamics of Jesus' opponents. Surprisingly, Pilate looks for some way to **release** Jesus. Yet, in the end, the governor caves to the pressure; he caves to the wishes of a fickle and manipulated mob ... who have been manipulated to call for Jesus' crucifixion. And so, Pilate waxes **practical**: Better to have one controversial teacher die than an uprising of thousands. So, Pilate too **abandons** Jesus.

Jesus is **alone** before the soldiers who ridicule and brutalize him. Then they lead him away to be crucified. It runs like a ribbon through the whole length of the Passion Narrative—the progressive **abandonment** of Jesus.

And then ... he hangs on the cross ... the emblem of suffering **and shame**. Jesus is mocked by religious leaders, passersby, and even two other victims on his right and left (**Mark 15:29-32**). So, Jesus on the cross gets **lots of attention**. Paradoxically, it's precisely this **attention** that confirms his **abandonment**. The One who came as God-**with**-us, has no one **with** him at his most desperate hour.

As to what Jesus **said** from the cross, the four Gospel writers remember several things. Mark records only **one**, that is, Jesus voicing the most lonesome **abandonment** of all ... crying out **to God**, "Why have **you abandoned** me?" Jesus voices **abandonment by God!** He's quoting **Psalm 22**, the desperate cry of an innocent sufferer. Jesus, in the agony of his crucifixion, identifies with the most terrible **abandonment** of all, feeling **abandoned by God**. Suspended high on the cross, this is the deepest low of his lonesome valley.

Since the early centuries of the church, Jesus' cry of **abandonment** from the cross has raised the question, "Where was **God** at Golgotha?" Did God **actually** turn his back on Jesus? Some Christian theology says, "Yes." Some **other** Christian theology says God was **so** fully **present with** and **in** Jesus, that **God** was crucified at Golgotha! Or, is the truth of the cross some mysterious **combination** of God's absence **and** God's presence at the same time?

"Where was **God** at Golgotha?" It's not an easy question to answer, is it? What we can say is that, no matter how **real** Jesus' words of **abandonment** on the cross are, they **do not erase** God's words at Jesus' baptism: ***You are my beloved. With you I am well pleased*** (**Mark 1:11**). Golgotha **doesn't** crucify Jesus' **beloved-ness**. **And** ... by entering **our** deepest **brokenness**, Jesus confirms **our beloved-ness** too.

Throughout the history of the church, much has been said about ***the cost of discipleship***; that is, the challenges and consequences of being Jesus' follower. Mark also wants us to know about ***the cost of messiahship***. It cost Jesus a lot of **abandonment** to love us so completely.

In the Passion Narrative, the progressive **abandonment** of Jesus is visible **everywhere**. It accumulates to an agonizing climax. Why is Mark so intent on showing it to us? Is he trying to make us sympathetic ... guilty ... grateful ... motivated? [ ]

Maybe what Mark wants us to know most of all is that Jesus entered the **real** world of **real** human beings, with real human dynamics and mixed motives and limitations.

And all those things apply to **disciples** just as much as everyone else. For all our confession and commitment, in the course of real life, our loyalty to Jesus gets **tested** and sometimes **compromised**. Our confidence in being his follower gets rattled. Our strenuous believing and inability to fully understand makes **us sleepy**. Our efforts at faith can be frustratingly slow to make a difference in the world and even in ourselves. **And** sometimes we just plain **fail**. We may not directly **deny** Jesus. And yet somehow, in some way, at some point, everyone **abandons** Jesus. Everyone! **Because** ... we're human.

And here's what else happens **because** we're human. Paul says it this way: We are "**treasure** in **clay jars**." Wondrously, it is **not spiritual acumen** but rather people who are **vulnerable** and **fallible** that God prefers to work with. Go figure! And God has definite reasons. Paul says its "so the extraordinary power is understood to be **God's** and **not ours**" (2 Corinthians 4:7).

Here's what else happens **because** we're human: **Abandonment** is **not** the last word ... for Jesus or for us. At the empty tomb on Easter morning, the heavenly figure says to the women, "Go tell Jesus' disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you into Galilee. There **you will see him**, just as he told you" (Mark 16:7). The very One they **all abandoned** goes ahead to be **reunited** with them. The **last** word of the Gospel is that **no one** gets left **alone**. Jesus is always ready to **reunite** with **us** ... indeed, always **with us**, even to the close of the age. Nothing in all creation can separate us.