

## **Who Are We That You Would Die for Us?**

Palm Sunday, March 25, 2018

John 19: 16b-22

Preached By Rev. Jessica C. Gregory

“How can anybody be moved to do something like that?” This is the question that rolls around in Georgetown Psychologist Dr. Abigail Marsh’s brain as she remembers that drive on the bridge when she was 19 years old. She was moving with traffic when a dog ran into the middle of her lane. She immediately swerved out of the way to avoid hitting it, but in doing so, her tires skidded and Abigail lost control of her vehicle. The car finally stopped — in the fast lane, facing oncoming traffic. Abigail froze in her seat, terror preventing her from attempting to start her car. As Abigail sat paralyzed, a fellow driver jumped into action. From across the lanes of traffic he quickly pulled his car over, got out of it, ran across the highway, and jumped into Abigail’s car to start it. The car started, and both were fine. Abigail’s stranger-hero had put himself in incredible danger to save her life. Why?

Decades later, his behavior still baffled Dr. Marsh, leading her to study altruism and the brain. The study found that one’s empathy is linked to the size of a person’s amygdala, the part of the brain associated with learned emotional responses and the processing of distressing stimuli. Though small, Dr. Abigail Marsh’s study offers us a possible explanation as to what makes those extremely altruistic people tick and why such risks aren’t taken by all of us (Bhattacharjee 2018).

Since the beginning of the year, we have been hearing and reflecting on the narratives of Jesus as told in the Gospel of John. Often referred to as the “other” gospel in contrast to the three synoptic books, Matthew, Mark and Luke, John tells us unique stories about Jesus’ healing, empathy and, as we just heard, Jesus’ crucifixion.

Fulfilling John’s purpose for his gospel — that Jesus is divine as well as human — John retells seven miracles that Jesus performs, signs that Jesus is God. But in this process, the humanity of Jesus is also revealed. I am convinced that, as those extraordinarily caring individuals in Dr. Marsh’s study, Jesus had a larger than average amygdala! His empathy is perhaps most obvious after the death of his friend Lazarus, with the shortest verse in the Bible: “Jesus wept.” Jesus is fully God, but was also fully human (John 11: 35).

Flesh and blood, organs and muscles, arteries and veins — just like us. As the soldiers flogged him he bled, his skin bruised, his body ached. Every muscle throbbed as he carried his cross to Golgotha, the hill called the “Place of the Skull,” where he would be crucified. Such a different journey than the one he took five days prior, on what we call Palm Sunday, the day we celebrate this morning. Like the Jews who welcomed him into Jerusalem, we began our service waving branches of palms, chanting hosanna,

full of hope and joy. But this year, that Narrative Lectionary won't let us stay standing on the sidelines on this usually "happy" Sunday, celebrating Jesus as he rides in on a donkey. Instead, for the third week in a row, the Narrative Lectionary takes us to Friday — the day of Jesus' crucifixion, the day of suffering, and the final day of Jesus' earthly life.

Our scripture for this morning picks up right where last week's left off. Jesus' trial has just ended. Pilate has handed Jesus over to the soldiers for him to be crucified. As was Roman custom, Jesus, after his flogging and in pain, was given his own crossbeam, weighing up to 125 pounds, to carry. However, the other three gospels slightly change the custom to have Simon of Cyrene carry the cross for him. Only in John does Jesus carry it himself. A reminder to all of us that Jesus, while being convicted by the people and leaders to death, is ultimately in control of his demise. A demise he is willing to endure, regardless of the facts that he is guilty of no crime and that the same people who were worshipping him five days ago were in the crowd chanting, "Crucify him!"

"How can anybody be moved to do something like that?" Abigail's Marsh's question resonates here. How can any human be willing to be crucified, not because of their guilt but because of everyone else's fear? Such an act is beyond altruistic. It is beyond what any human could be moved to do. It is beyond what God was moved to do throughout the Hebrew Scripture. It is beyond what Jesus was uncomfortable with, even as he knew it was his divine mission.

Jesus' crucifixion is beyond our comprehension, which is why God brought it about — so that we might know, in our core, of God's deep love for us, for all of us. Our question for this morning, which refers to Jesus, is: "Who are we that you should die for us?" But it really should be: "Who are you that you would give us life?" This is not about who we are, but about who Jesus was, is and always will be.

The gospels agree. Jesus was King of the Jews who came from the Galilean city of Nazareth. But as John begins his gospel, Jesus was also from above, with God: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Later, "the Word became flesh and lived among us..." (John 1:1, 14). Jesus, God, came not from Nazareth but from what we only know as "above" and "in the beginning" — the mystery of the commencement of that which is life. How much must God love us humans to come to earth as one of us! To experience our realities of living — walking, running, eating, sleeping, relating, and feeling all of our emotions — happiness, joy, anxiety, sorrow, regret, and anger. To experience suffering *with us and for us*.

No longer must we be trapped by our sinful living; for through God's grace, through God's gift of Jesus, we are forgiven; we are made new creations in Christ over and over again! God so loved all the world

that God not only gave us God's self in the person of Jesus, but God handed Jesus over to us to die — for us! There is No Greater Love. This is our God. This is Jesus.

Only in John's gospel is Jesus' crossbeam inscribed, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" in Hebrew, Greek and Latin, as it is pictured on your bulletin. While it was the usual practice for the charges against the one crucified to be hung around their necks or affixed to their crosses, it was odd that Jesus' charges were written in three languages. On one level, the three-fold translation gives an inclusive warning to the diversity of people living in the region — if any dare have thoughts of going up against Caesar they will meet same fate as the one on this cross (Carlson, 2015). But being written in the language of the local people, the imperial court and the empire's common language also reveals that this crucifixion is God's way of keeping God's promises, the promises of Jesus, to bring *all* people to himself through his death and resurrection.

Jesus died for all of them. Jesus died for the Hebrew-speaking Jewish leaders, those who were utterly against Jesus and the Justice and Peace for which he stood. Jesus died for the Roman leaders like Pilate who were fluent in Greek and Latin. Jesus died for the Jews on that Friday so long ago. Jesus died a Jew, the King of the Jews, but he died for all people. He died for us so that we might live. As we together praised "the God who loves us enough to take on Jesus' sufferings for us" in our Call to Worship, we gave thanks for the sacrifice of Jesus' life which redeems us, today and always.

Jesus died because of us because of humans' sinful nature of hate, fear and cowardice. Jesus died specifically because of Pilate's choice, fueled by fear, to abide by the crowd's wishes to have Jesus crucified despite finding that Jesus had done no wrong. But Jesus died for us, too. His death was part of his mission on earth, which is acknowledged throughout the book of John. As he died, he took on the fear of Pilate, the fear of Peter, and the fear of Lazarus — not to mention the greed, power and lust, as well as all the other ways that we in the world say NO to God's YES.

Three years ago Kate Bowler, assistant professor at Duke Divinity School, received life's biggest NO. She got a diagnosis of stage four colon cancer. No matter that she was in her mid-thirties, had a toddler son, Zach, and had just begun her teaching at Duke. She was going to die, soon. In a *New York Times* op-ed article in February of 2016, she describes the NOs she confronted with her illness:

*Cancer has kicked down the walls of my life. I cannot be certain if I will walk my son to his elementary school one day or subject his love interests to cheerful scrutiny. I struggle to buy books for academic projects I fear I can't finish for a perfect job I may be unable to keep. I have surrendered my favorite manifestoes about having it all, managing my work-life balance and maximizing my potential...Cancer*

*requires that I stumble around in the debris of dreams I thought I was entitled to and plans I didn't realize I had made"* (Bowler 2016).

But she goes on to describe the unexpected YESs she has found:

*"...Cancer has also ushered in new ways of being alive....In my vulnerability I am seeing my world without the instagrammed filter of breezy certainties and perfectible moments. I can't help noticing the brittleness of the walls that keep most people fed, shelter and whole. I find myself returning to the same thoughts again and again: Life is so beautiful. Life is so hard"* (Bowler 2016).

Today, though her death is imminent, Kate is still courageously embracing life. She is giving Jesus her fear — of uncertainty, of leaving her beloved Zach way too early, of leaving the love of her life alone — and has let Jesus take it on. She is taking from Jesus the gift of life abundant, one day at a time. She continues to live, to teach, to write and to travel. Though not what she expected, Kate has chosen not to succumb to the disease that will take her life but to say YES to life as it is today. This is what God yearns for us to do, too. Let God take on our NOs in life and embrace the gift of love that is YES. This is why Jesus died, so that we might have life abundant! Life free, not controlled by fear but by faith, faith not in knowing what is ahead but in knowing that God is with us in it. Through her study on empathy and the brain, Dr. Abigail Marsh got answers to her question of how anybody could be moved to put their life in danger to save a perfect stranger. Through our journey through John, particularly our reflections on the events of Friday these past three weeks, we answer our question: "Who are we that you would die for us?" with this question: "Who are you that you would give us life?" And we can answer it this way: "You are Jesus, God incarnate. You are the one who replaces hate with love. There is No Greater love than yours, for all of us." We need only to say YES to it. Thanks be to God. Amen

### Works Cited

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