

“Preaching Lent and Easter”
Tri-State Forum, January 28, 2010

Dr. David J. Lull
Professor of New Testament
Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, IA

Lecture II. *Lessons from the First Holy Week for Preaching on Good Friday
Finding Good News Again for the First Time*

Jesus’ disciples did not think “Friday” of “the first Holy Week” was “good” at all. To them it seemed to bring God’s saving action to an end—it seemed to be finished, crushed, and defeated. No one jumped up and shouted with joy, “Thanks be to God! Jesus has finally died for the forgiveness of our sins! Let us rejoice and be glad!” Listen to how the disciples on the road to Emmaus responded when a stranger, the resurrected Jesus, asked them what things had taken place in Jerusalem: “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people...our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place” (Lk 24.19b-21). These are not very celebratory words! As far as they were concerned, Jesus’ mission had ended in defeat, and they were going home to life as they knew it before they met Jesus.

Or, perhaps “Friday” of “the first Holy Week” was the “the end” in the sense of the point toward which God’s saving actions in Jesus had been leading. The traditional interpretation of that “Friday” would have us believe it was “good” because on that day Jesus finished his God-sent mission to die for our sins. Forgiveness of sins is indeed good—especially unconditional forgiveness through God’s grace. Or is it by God’s grace and through faith alone? I don’t think I’ll go there right now, because I can’t get past the idea that God had a thirst for innocent blood that had to be quenched, or that God’s justice required a death-penalty for sinners until Jesus’ death satisfied God’s wrath. Even if Bible passages can be made to support these ideas, I can’t get past the idea that God had been unforgiving before Jesus died. That’s not the God I find in the Bible.

Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan tell a story that wonderfully illustrates what’s wrong with substitutionary and satisfaction atonement theories. I’m reading from *The Last Week*, p. 38.¹

Let me also share with you Jim Wallis’s reflections on January 14, two days after the terrible earthquake in Haiti:²

There are times when events make everything else pale in comparison. ...the news of Tuesday’s 7.0-magnitude earthquake hitting Haiti is one of those times. Over the past few hours, I haven’t been able to take my eyes off CNN. The tragedy in Haiti is unbelievable -- the pictures of the pain and destruction are haunting. My heart breaks for the families and the victims of this tragedy....

I also want to say a word about God and evil. Pat Robertson said that Haiti’s earthquake was caused because of the country’s “pact with the devil.” I don’t even know what he means, nor do I care. But I want to say this: My God does not cause evil. God is not a vengeful and retributive being, waiting to strike us down; instead, God is in the very midst of this tragedy, suffering with those who are suffering. When evil strikes, it’s easy to ask, where is God? The answer is simple: God is suffering with those who are suffering....

So, an alternative to traditional substitutionary or satisfaction atonement theories is to think of “Good Friday,” not as the beginning of God’s saving action in Jesus, but as its “end,” in the sense that it represents the aim and purpose, the “*first* passion,” of what God was doing *in Jesus’ life all along*: namely, entering in full solidarity and accompaniment with the marginalized and oppressed. This was and

¹ Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: The Day-by-Day Account of Jesus’s Final Week in Jerusalem* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).

² Jim Wallis, “Hearts and Minds,” published in *SojoMail*, an email version of *Sojourners*.

is “good news” for those with whom God in Christ is in solidarity: God’s justice was and is with and for them. It is “bad news” for the unjust: for, when God identified with the crucified Christ, God relativized their power and their systems of *faux* “justice.”

God’s justice in the crucified Christ not one of penal substitution, satisfaction, or appeasement, but of *solidarity*—with both sinners and “*the sinned against*,” people who are “crucified” and suffer under systems of exploitation and domination³—and of *universal compassion*—for both sinners and *the sinned against*. This “good news” turns traditional symbolic universes on their heads! The justice of the God who is love does not seek death and destruction for sinners and *the sinned against*, as “the world” envisions ideal “justice”; rather, God’s justice is all about the *transformation* of sinners and *the sinned against*.

We need to pause a moment to consider another reason why I’m skipping over the important ecumenical discussion of “the doctrine of justification.” I have come to believe that, as important as that Reformation doctrine is, along with the partial rapprochement between Lutherans and Roman Catholics on that doctrine—to which the Methodists have added their affirmation—that doctrine’s vision of salvation is too limited. It isn’t big enough to encompass those who are *sinned against*: the innocent poor, especially the poorest among the poor; the innocent victims of violence in their homes, communities; innocent victims of war; innocent victims of genetic malfunctions and disease; innocent victims of ordinary accidents; and innocent creatures who are victims of ecological injustice. The list could go on. These innocent victims do not need forgiveness for their plight! They do need divine grace, powerful grace, and enormous doses of it.

Faith may be an important part of receiving this grace for those who are *sinned against*—especially for innocent human victims of circumstances beyond their power to prevent. But I’m talking about a grace that has reality whether innocent victims receive it in and with faith or not. This is a grace that stands with innocent victims and in their suffering and says, “No! This is not my will! It is not the last word! I will work with the world—victimizers, people of good will, and all creation—to do everything I can to save you from harm and to prevent further harm.” God is doing that right now in Haiti, and all around the world, and in our own hearts and lives.

You see, ideal power and justice, as revealed on “Good Friday,” is not imperial *domination* but *solidarity* in the order of “uncountable infinity.”⁴ What do I mean by “solidarity in the order of *uncountable infinity*”? It’s when you imagine any aim, purpose, or action as unlimited and ever expanding. With God, it’s when we cannot conceive of a greater love and forgiveness than a love and forgiveness that embrace all who have sinned and all who have been *sinned against*, and all who ever will sin or be *sinned against*. “All” is an “uncountable infinity,” so God’s love and forgiveness extend in “uncountable infinity.”

With this overview in mind, let’s take a look at selected Holy Week readings.

1. We begin with readings for Maundy/Holy Thursday.

Exod 12.1-14 describes instructions for the slaughter of a young, unblemished lamb, spreading some of its blood on the door posts and lintel of the house, and consuming it, as part of God’s liberation of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. As you think about this story, keep in mind the following:

- (a) The Hebrews were a people who had been *sinned against*. The primary theme is their liberation from slavery, not the forgiveness of their sins. To interpret Jesus’ death through the lens of the Exodus story requires that we make liberation from slavery its primary theme.

³ For the use of this phrase by feminists and liberation theologians, see, e.g., Barbara E. Reid, *Taking Up the Cross: New Testament Interpretation Through Latina and Feminist Eyes*, revised edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007); Walter Altmann, *Luther and Liberation: A Latin American Perspective*, trans. Mary M. Solberg (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992); Paul S. Chung, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, and Kyöng-jae Kim, *Asian Contextual Theology for the Third Millennium: A Theology of Minjung in Fourth-Eye Formation*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series, 70 (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2007); and Andrew Sung Park, *Triune Atonement: Christ’s Healing for Sinners, Victims, and the Whole Creation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

⁴ This is one of the metaphors for God in Carolyn Stahl Bohler, *God the What?: What Our Metaphors for God Reveal About Our Beliefs in God* (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths, 2008).

That's what is meant in 1 Cor 5.7 ("Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed."): ⁵ Paul told the Corinthians to celebrate the Passover festival as people set free from "malice and evil" (5.8). ⁶ 1Cor 7.23 sounds like an echo of the Exodus story of liberation from slavery. In Rom 3.24-25, Jesus' "faithful death" brings "deliverance" (*apolytrōsis*) from slavery to sin. ⁷ Liberation from slavery to sin is the point of Romans 6. All creation also "groans" for the same "deliverance" as the promised "deliverance of our bodies": namely, "deliverance" from "suffering," "futility," and "decay" (Rom 8.18-23). It is clear that this "deliverance" brings "freedom" (Rom 8.21), and not (just) "forgiveness." So also in the Gospel of John, Jesus' death on Passover is the event that reveals the truth about Jesus that brings freedom from slavery to sin (Jn 8.31-34). I am not saying you can't find biblical support for the message of God's gracious forgiveness of sins ⁸ and for linking forgiveness of sins to Jesus' death. ⁹ My point is simply this: it's not the primary theme in the interpretation of Jesus' death in the Gospels and Pauline letters. Remember, John the Baptist was the prophet who was to proclaim salvation by forgiveness of sins before Jesus (Lk 1.77)! ¹⁰ Besides, Acts 5.31 attributes Jesus' authority to forgive sins to his ascension to God's "right hand," not to his death! In any case, the theme of the Exodus story is not forgiveness—it is not even about sin—it's about emancipation and liberation from injustice. It's a message for those who are *sinned against*. It is a message of hope today for Haitians, and others among the poorest of the poor, exploited and neglected by the wealthiest of the wealthy.

(b) When God saw the blood of the lamb on their houses, God would "pass over" them as God struck down the firstborn of every living thing in Egypt and executed judgment on their gods. That's grace only from the perspective of *the Hebrews who were sinned against*; from the perspective of those who sinned against the Hebrews and their God, it is the full wrath of God, without any restraint or regard for innocent Egyptians. It hardly measures up to the "uncountable infinity" of divine love and forgiveness! Let's not valorize violence as God's chosen means of liberating slaves from foreign powers. Instead, let's lament the remembrance of the emancipation of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt as an act of divine violence in epic proportions—the very kind that Pat Robertson saw in the Haiti earthquake. From the perspective of the cross, God identifies with "crucified people," does all that is possible for God to do to free them from suffering, futility, and death, and seeks the transformation of those who sin against them, not through violent retaliation, but through forgiveness (Lk 23.34)! We should not pull back from speaking out against the sanctification of violence just because it's embedded in some biblical stories. Our world today doesn't need words of terror and violence; it needs words of hope for nonviolent solutions to conflict, exploitation, and domination. God has given us just such a Word of hope, who took his place among *the sinned against*. God claimed the crucified and risen Christ as God's sign that God desires an end to all suffering and death, and an end to all sin against the poor and powerless.

⁵ Quotations from scripture are adapted from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

⁶ See David J. Lull, *1 Corinthians*, Chalice Commentaries for Today (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2007); a revised and expanded edition of William A. Beardslee, *First Corinthians: A Commentary for Today* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1994), 40-44.

⁷ See John B. Cobb, Jr., and David J. Lull, *Romans*, Chalice Commentaries for Today (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2005), 63-70. Compare BDAG *apolytrōsis* 2. This term belongs to the *lytron* word-group, which I discussed in regard to Mk 10.54 in the first lecture.

⁸ See, e.g., the Lord's Prayer and Lk 24.47, which summarize Jesus' message of forgiveness in the Synoptic Gospels.

⁹ See, e.g., Mt 26.28. In the rest of the New Testament, beyond the Gospels and the Pauline letters, see especially the so-called Letter to the Hebrews.

¹⁰ Compare Mk 1.4 and Lk 3.3!

Ps 116.1-2, 12-19 chops out the list of harsh realities from which God delivers “the faithful ones.” In the light of the tragedy in Haiti, you might consider restoring verses 3-11! Also, the lectionary seems to invite us to read this psalm, not only as words of hope to the world’s “afflicted,” but also as a frame for interpreting Jesus as one of the “faithful ones” whose death is “precious in the sight of the LORD.” Jesus’ death is “precious in the sight of God,” not for his death itself, but for his *faithfulness*! At least in Luke’s version of Jesus’ “passion,” Jesus “kept faith” even when he was “greatly afflicted” (Ps 116.10): for Luke replaced Jesus’ protest against God’s abandonment at his crucifixion in Mark (15.34) with his profession of faith (Lk 23.46)!

1 Cor 11.23-26 contains the oldest “words of institution” (also found in Lk 22.19-20). “My body” and “my blood” clearly refer to Jesus’ death (see 1 Cor 11.26), and so does “this cup,” which not only refers to the literal drinking cup but also to the “cup” of martyrdom (see Mk 10.38). The words “my body *for you*” have been taken to mean “my death *in place of you*” in the sense of *substitutionary* sacrifice for atonement. But that is not the only way to interpret these words. Whereas the idea of substitution would seem to make participation in Jesus’ death unnecessary, Paul spoke about Jesus’ death as an event in which the faithful *participate*. In the previous chapter Paul wrote about *participation in Christ’s blood and body* (10.16-17). Every issue in this letter has to do with the transformation that *participation in Christ* is supposed to bring about.¹¹

Moreover, Paul says that anyone who “eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord” (10.27). That sounds like Jesus’ death is at most a *conditional* “substitution,” if it is a substitution at all. Besides, the main point of this pericope, obscured by the lectionary’s surgical removal of the “words of institution” from its context: Paul’s outrage over exclusion and humiliation of the poor by the rich at the Lord’s Supper (11.17-22, 33-34)! So, once again, worship, especially the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, the proclamation of “the Lord’s death until he comes,” is supposed to dramatize God’s justice “on earth as in heaven,” not the world’s injustice. Desire for a spiritual experience of God’s grace, valuable in its own right, is supposed to free us to see—and to work with and for—God’s transformative, liberating grace for all who are *sinned against*, including all creation.

Jn 13.1-17, 31b-35 has to be one of the weirdest surgical cut-ups of a passage. I appreciate the difficult task the lectionary committee has to come up with a pericope of manageable length. But verses 31-35 are incomprehensible apart from verses 18-30! First, Judas’ betrayal is wedged between Jesus’ performance of an “example” of the “new commandment” as he “loved them to the end,” first by playing the role of the lowly slave to his disciples and then by glorifying God with his faithfulness to the end, even to death. Second, by cutting out the verse that describes when Jesus “went out” as “night” (13.30b), the lectionary committee obscures the light/darkness symbolism so central to John’s Gospel. Those who think they are going to take Jesus’ life away from him do so in the darkness of night, just as they prefer to walk in darkness in their lives.¹² “The light of the world,” the eternal, divine Word incarnate in Jesus (1.4, 8.12, 9.5),¹³ shines God’s light in the darkness of the world by willingly laying down his life in faithful obedience to God (10.11-18). Now, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (15.13) does not mean Jesus laid down his life *in the place of/instead of* “his friends.” That’s the wise, if misguided, counsel of Caiaphas, the high priest, that “it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed” (11.50). As an indication that the author of John does agree with this substitutionary theory, we are told that Caiaphas had “prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but *to gather into one the dispersed children of God*” (11.51-52). That sounds more like a shepherd gathering lost sheep than a sacrificial lamb!¹⁴ It sounds like a witness to the “uncountable infinitude” of God’s transformative, liberating love for the whole world! Jesus’ “example” of God’s “pure, unbounded love, . . . love divine, all loves excelling,” in the words of

¹¹ See Lull, *1 Corinthians*.

¹² Do a search on dark/darkness in the Gospel and letters of John.

¹³ Do a search on light in the Gospel and letters of John.

¹⁴ See Jn 1.29, 36. Also see my comments on the association of Jesus’ crucifixion with the Passover in my first lecture.

Charles Wesley's hymn, is no less emptying of his life than a "substitutionary sacrifice," but oh how much more satisfying than bloodthirsty atonement theories that slander God's character as love, which desires, not death, but faithfulness in life, even to the point of death. Jesus' death itself does not glorify God. It was his faithful obedience and love to the end that glorified God!

2. Good Friday

Isa 52.13-53.12 is the fourth "servant song" in Second Isaiah. These songs express the hope of Jews for deliverance from exile in Babylon (today's Iraq) and for the restoration of Israel. Their deliverance came after nearly 50 years of exile, when Cyrus, the king of the Persian Empire (today's Iran), conquered the Babylonian Empire, let the Jews return to Judea, and permitted them to rebuild their temple at the end of the 6th century B.C.E. In that context, these songs were 100% theological and 100% political, for they articulate a faith that God would liberate Jews from slavery in the foreign land.

These songs continued to shape Jewish expectations for the coming of the Messiah of Israel up to the time of Jesus, and beyond it to the present day. The identity of the "servant of God" is a matter of on-going debate, divided among those who think it is Israel itself, collectively the people of Israel, and those who think of the servant as an individual, a faithful and righteous Israelite. New Testament writers identified the servant with Jesus.

In the first Song (42.1-9), the servant's task is to "bring forth justice." In the second (49.1-13), the servant, "Israel," will gather the scattered tribes of Jacob and become "a light to the nations," so that God's "salvation may reach to the end of the earth." The servant in the third Song (50.4-9) faces opponents with confident faith in God's help and vindication. Although New Testament writers saw Jesus in all four Servant Songs, it was the fourth Song, our Good Friday text, that seemed to fit Jesus, the crucified Messiah. Let's first look closely at the structure of this Song.

(a) In 52.13-15, God speaks of "my" servant's prosperous future, despite an appearance made grotesque by afflictions.

(b) In 53.1-3, exiles confess that they, repulsed by his appearance, despised and rejected God's servant.¹⁵

(c) In 53.4-6, the interpretive key to the whole Song, the exiles nevertheless acknowledge their indebtedness to this servant, whom they regarded as "stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted." As one "wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities," this servant's punishment... made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed."

(d) The exiles continue their speech in 53.7-11a by praising the servant's faithful obedience to his God-given role. On the one hand, they recognize the injustice of the servant's afflictions; on the other, they attribute those afflictions to God's "will." The main point seems to be that, although they could not imagine the future God had in mind for this servant, because of his afflictions, they are confident that "through him the will of the LORD shall prosper" (v. 10b). The NRSV translates a key phrase in verse 10a, noting that the Hebrew is "uncertain," "When you make his life *an offering for sin*." The NET translates it, "once restitution is made." Then, in their note on this phrase, the NET translators argue that "the servant's reparation offering" *follows* the servant's suffering and brings about the restoration of the servant's "favor" with God.

(e) In 53.11b-12, as at the beginning of the Song, God speaks again of the servant's vindication and exaltation. Again, key phrases in the Hebrew are "uncertain"! The main point seems to be that the servant will acquit the exiles by taking their transgressions on himself.

The fourth Song is the key passage in support of the idea that the suffering and death of Jesus, God's innocent servant, was a *substitution* for the punishment of the guilty. "Echoes" of this Song can be detected in the New Testament,¹⁶ but direct quotes are rare and scattered.¹⁷ So, I don't think it is the primary lens for the New Testament's interpretation of Jesus' suffering and death. Nevertheless, it has an

¹⁵ Note the collective/royal first person plurals.

¹⁶ See Mt 27.57-61, Lk 24.26, Rom 4.25, 5.18-19, Phil 2.9, 1 Pet 2.24.

¹⁷ See Mt 8.17, Lk 22.37, 23.34, Acts 8.32, Rom 8.34, 1 Pet 2.22, 25.

important place in the history of interpretation, so I want to offer indicate briefly a few themes for Good Friday meditations.

(a) This Song laments the dire consequences of national guilt. It does not name specifics, so we can plug in whatever reasons we have to lament as a nation. We will not all have the same list: some will name laws that permit abortion and gay marriage; some will name laws that deny equal protections to gays and lesbians; some will name neglect of the world's poor; some will name allowing many to go without adequate healthcare; some will name bad stewardship of the creation; some will name preemptive, elective wars; some will name racism. The list goes on. Rituals of lament that name those who bear the wounds of our transgressions might be transformative.

(b) This Song envisions God's servant as one who will save the guilty from punishment by grace alone.

(c) This Song envisions God's servant as one who suffers for the guilty. There are several dangers here, so it's necessary to point out that the Song-writer does not say that God *values* suffering; rather, as God's servant, the suffering servant represents *God's* suffering on behalf of—even instead of—the guilty. What a revolutionary vision: *God* suffers for the guilty, instead of afflicting the guilty with suffering! It's also important to point out that the Song portrays the servant's suffering as following from the servant's *own willing, faithful obedience* to God's will, and as *God's* doing (see my previous point!). Great harm, especially to women, the poor, and slaves, has been caused by valorizing the suffering of God's suffering servant.¹⁸ We must be careful to reject the view that any and all suffering is willed by God and, therefore, must be accepted. To repeat my first point: the suffering servant represents *God's* suffering for—even in place of—the guilty.

Psalm 22 shapes most of the structure and details of the stories of Jesus' crucifixion in the Gospels, especially Mark's version, which has Jesus utter its opening line as Jesus' last words (Mk 15.34).¹⁹ Matthew follows Mark,²⁰ but Luke replaces this "cry of dereliction" with a profession of faith, words of forgiveness for his executioners, and a promise of a place in "paradise" for one of the other "bandits" (Lk 23.46, 34, 43). Jesus' last words in the Gospel of John—"It is finished." (Jn 19.30)²¹—announce that he finished doing "the works" of the One who sent him (Jn 9.4): to show the truth of God's love for the world and to glorify God by loving the world to the end. So, only Mark and Matthew, his faithful reviser, show Jesus' authentically human protest at being abandoned by God. Let's preserve these *distinctive* portraits of Jesus in our services around Jesus' seven last words on the cross.

Let's return to the psalm. It begins with a strong note of despair and ends in a strong note of hope. Resist the temptation to move too quickly and easily to the note of hope. The psalmist invites us to shake our fist in protest to God for being, how should I put it, so unseen and unfelt in the midst of our afflictions. Protest that God has given some people stronger free will than others, that God has given some of creation insufficient freedom or power to act in accord with God's will for life. Protest the unbending will of tectonic plates that shake the foundations of the earth where millions of people innocently live under conditions that are already unbearably harsh. Protest the unbending will of cancer cells, and of bullets and bombs. Protest the imbalance of power between children and abusive adults, and between women and violent men. Stay a while in moments of righteous indignation at the unfairness in the distribution of freedom and power, and in moments of lament and protest at the crushing loss of a beloved member of this community and faithful servant of God. Only then invite us to stand in the light of hope, grounded in God's faithfulness to always call new servants of justice, liberators, healers, and prophets and teachers of the ways of peace. Proclaim the hope that "the poor shall eat and be satisfied... and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it" (Ps 22.26-31).

¹⁸ See 1 Pet 2.18-3.22.

¹⁹ Also see Mt 27.46.

²⁰ See Mt 27.46.

²¹ Two verses earlier (19.28), we might detect an echo to Ps 22.15 and 69.21. For John's other "last words," see 19.26-27.

Jn 18.1-19.42 shows Jesus in charge. Unlike Isaiah's sheep, sheared and slaughtered in silence, Jesus barks commands at the temple soldiers and police, makes them wet their pants when he reveals that he is God as he shouts out "I Am," and then cross-examines and challenges his interrogators in the temple and Pilate's headquarters. As in the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus' arrest has all the marks of covert operation to seize the leader of a terrorist cell. Jesus steps in to stop Peter's armed resistance and to protect his disciples from being arrested with him, demonstrating again that he "loved them to the end" (13.1).

That John's narrative of the proceedings leading to Jesus' crucifixion is 100% theological and 100% *political* is already evident in the arrest scene. But it is clearer in the *faux* trial scenes. Instead of accusing Jesus of crimes in a trial before the temple council, the temple authorities try to extract information from him about his "disciples and his teaching." Even when they try to intimidate him with measures of "extreme rendition," he refused to answer their questions and rebuked them for having poor intelligence and for unjustly beating him. Consistent with their role as partners in maintaining law and order with the Roman occupation government, they hand Jesus over to Pilate, a man well known for the use of excessive violence to suppress resistance to Roman rule.

Out of the blue, Pilate asks if Jesus was "the king of the Judeans."²² The temple authorities had not explained what Jesus had done "wrong" when they turned Jesus over as a "criminal."²³ So, why does the narrator lead off with this question? Clearly, the narrator wants to tell us that Jesus' "royalty" was a challenge to earthly rulers, especially those of the Roman Empire. As we will see, his challenge was directed against Pilate as much as against the temple authorities.

Pilate shows he has no idea what to make of Jesus' statement, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Judeans. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." Finding nothing to charge him with, he mockingly offers to release this "king of the Judeans." The Judean leaders shout "No, Barabbas," a convicted insurgent. John portrays them as leaders who preferred an armed rebel over a nonviolent prophet.²⁴

Still clueless, Pilate tries again to release him. This time the temple authorities tell Pilate that Jesus claimed to be "a son of God." Now Pilate understands what's at stake and is "more afraid than ever"! For that made Jesus a challenger to the emperor, who alone claimed that title. But Pilate still does not get it. He thinks Jesus is just another rival of the emperor who could easily be disposed of, as others had been.

Nevertheless, Pilate tries again to release Jesus. This time, the Judean leaders take Pilate to school on what should have been obvious: "If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor." Undeterred, Pilate mockingly presents Jesus as their "king" and asks, "Shall I crucify your King?" That elicits the pledge of loyalty to the emperor that the narrator has been coaxing out of the Judean leaders all along: "We have no king but the emperor!" In response to this pledge of loyalty to the emperor, Pilate hands Jesus over to "them" to be crucified. But, wait, the Judeans had no authority to put anyone to death by crucifixion! With this little pronoun, John launched a fateful revision of history that would lead to the deaths of millions of Jews once Christians flipped the world on its head and sat on imperial thrones themselves. Christians, no less than the Judean leaders, have demonstrated all too often that their loyalty belonged to earthly rulers more than to Christ and the One who sent him to love the whole world "to the end."

So, what is "good" about the first "Friday" of "the first Holy Week"? It is not that the Judeans and Romans, with the help of one of Jesus' close associates, fulfilled some divine plan by killing Jesus. It

²² The traditional translation, "king of the Jews," is problematic for at least three reasons. (1) "Jews" is a term for people observant of Mosaic traditions scattered in many nations, so it would not make sense to speak of their "king." (2) The region under the temple and Pilate's jurisdiction is Judea. The Romans deposed their client "king," Herod's son Archelaus, and replaced him with Roman agents of the emperor. Pilate would, therefore, be concerned about anyone aspiring to be "king of Judea." (3) The traditional translation has had a fateful history of persecution of Jews throughout Christian history. An increasingly popular translation among scholars is "Judeans."

²³ The Greek has "one who does wrong" (compare Jn 18.23 and 18.30).

²⁴ Compare Josephus's portrait of the Zealots who instigated the Judean revolt of the 60s.

is that Jesus loved the world “to the end”! It is that Jesus and the One who sent him to love the world “to the end” are the truly “royal” ones, not empires and earthly rulers and their systems of domination and death. This Word of love existed from the beginning, was with God, and was of God’s own essence. This Word of love created all things: not one thing was made without this eternal Word of love. This eternal Word of love is the true light that shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot put it out. This eternal Word enlightens everyone about the truth of God’s love for the world.

Bibliography:

- Bartlett, David Lyon, and Barbara Brown Taylor. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Preaching the Revised common lectionary. Year C, vol. 2: Lent to Eastertide. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.
- Borg, Marcus J., and John Dominic Crossan. *The Last Week: The Day-by-Day Account of Jesus’s Final Week in Jerusalem*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006.
- Crossan, John Dominic, N. T. Wright, and Robert B. Stewart. *The Resurrection of Jesus: John Dominic Crossan and N.T. Wright in Dialogue*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006.
- Culbertson, Philip Leroy, and David B. Lott. *New Proclamation. Year C, 2010, Easter to Christ the King*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 2009.
- Lott, David B., Timothy J. Mulder, Kim L. Beckmann, Margaret P. Aymer, and Charles Lynvel Rice. *New Proclamation: Year C, 2009-2010, Advent Through Holy Week*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009.
- Patterson, Stephen J. *Beyond the Passion: Rethinking the Death and Life of Jesus*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004.
- Wright, N. T. *The Challenge of Easter*. Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2009.
- Wright, N. T. *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 3. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003.