

Crisis

From the Lenten sermon series: The Servant of the Lord

Text: Isaiah 53:12; Luke 19:42-44

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

... he exposed himself to face death. Isaiah 53:12

If only you had known, on this great day, the way that leads to peace! But no; it is hidden from your sight ... you did not recognize God's moment when it came. Luke. 19:42-44

“Crisis” is a word that strikes fear into our hearts. We do our best to avoid a crisis. We speak of life in turmoil as “one crisis after another.” Crisis is a word that fills the heart with anxiety and calls up images of fear – an accident scene, the emergency room, the family waiting room next to the Intensive Care Unit of the hospital, broken relationships, disaster, political upheaval – and the list goes on. From crisis on a personal level to crisis of cosmic proportions, it seems our world reels from crisis to crisis.

But on reflection, the real meaning of crisis is not synonymous with danger nor need it be associated exclusively with feelings of dread. Our English word “crisis” is derived from the Greek “Krisis” coming from the verb to decide. The crisis point is the time of decision. In the case of a disease it is the turning point when a change takes place - either for recovery or for death. In the case of any historical progression or series of events, the crisis is the decisive moment when events will take one direction or another, depending on the decision made, the response to the moment.

My point is simply that crisis can be seen in a positive light just as well as in a negative light. Crisis viewed only in terms of danger misses the equally true presence of opportunity. Although I have not got the documentation, I remember reading somewhere that in written Chinese, the character for danger and for opportunity is the same. Thus, this insight is reflected in various languages revealing the reality of our historical existence – at history's critical junctures, at the critical junctures of a nation's history, an institution's existence, an individual's life, decision is demanded and, depending on the decision made, the consequence will be judgment or grace, peace or destruction, life or death.

In this Lenten series, our focus is on Jesus, the Servant of the Lord. We began with the declaration of John the Baptist, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,” words recorded by John in his Gospel which recalled the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, the innocent one who bore the sins of his people.

We noted that John the Baptist hoped Jesus would destroy sin and wickedness, bringing judgment on the world. John the Baptist hoped Jesus was the one who was to come – the return of the fiery Elijah calling down the wrath of God from heaven.

Jesus, however, found his identity rather in the Servant of Isaiah – the one who brings salvation to earth's farthest bounds, who is light to the nations, who does not crush the broken reed or snuff out the smoldering wick. He set his face steadfastly toward Jerusalem, just as the Servant in Isaiah 50:7 set his face “like a flint.” His identity clear, he carried out his mission with deliberate intentionality.

If we go back to the second message in the series, the focus on Jesus' identity and intentionality, we find in the text in Luke 9:15 Jesus setting his face resolutely toward Jerusalem. Luke uses the framework of a journey toward Jerusalem to tell a large part of the story of Jesus. He begins this long section with these words:

As the time approached when he was to be taken up to heaven, he set his face resolutely toward Jerusalem.

We can trace references to Jerusalem throughout the subsequent chapters (13:22, 31-35; 17:11, 18:31, 19:11, 28, 41). The lesson for today, Palm Sunday, finds Jesus entering the city amid the acclaim of his disciples and, as he catches sight of the city from the heights of Olivet, Luke records that he wept and uttered a lament filled with pathos:

*If only you had known, on this great day, the way that leads to peace!
But no; it is hidden from your sight. ... you did not recognize God's
moment when it came.*

This was God's moment for Jerusalem. God visited Jerusalem in the person and the ministry of Jesus. Luke's account of Palm Sunday is carefully detailed to fit his purpose in writing the Gospel. Jesus comes a King, but a King of peace.

Did you notice that there are no palms or branches in Luke's account? Palm branches occur in John's Gospel. They were associated with nationalistic celebrations and John is portraying this misconstrual of many who hailed Jesus as a national deliverer. But Luke makes it clear that Jesus comes not as a political Messiah.

In John's Gospel the acclamation is to “The King of Israel,” but Luke says only “King”, omitting the reference to the Nation.

This is a King with a difference; this is a peaceable King who comes humbly as the Servant of the Lord, precipitating a crisis to be sure, but not a crisis of national liberation, but rather a crisis of peace or destruction.

There is a great debate among New Testament scholars as to whether Jesus understood himself as the Messiah or not. The Messianic consciousness of Jesus has been argued back and forth for decades. I wonder if the answer does not lie in the fact that Jesus avoided the Messianic designation because he knew that in the mind of the people it was so heavily freighted with political and nationalistic association that it was unusable for his purpose. He resisted all efforts to make him a King - one who would supply bread (John 6) and overthrow the occupying power.

Rather, he adopted the model of the Servant of the Lord who willingly bore the transgressions of his people, thus bringing peace. The crisis for Jesus occurred early in his ministry when he struggled in the wilderness. He chose the path of obedience and suffering. He set his face resolutely, like a flint, toward Jerusalem and now arriving there knows full well he will be rejected and being rejected will die, but in the rejection Jerusalem will bring upon itself disaster.

For Jesus, the crisis faced, the decision of obedience and faithfulness resulted in death – but finally in resurrection.

For Jerusalem, the crisis faced, the decision of rejection resulted in terrible destruction.

Luke spoke of God's moment - literally the time of visitation. Time in the Greek is Kairos - time understood in terms of its content - filled time, time filled with significance. Not "Chronos" - the idea of time as duration, the succession of moments.

There are those moments within the succession of moments, the flow of time which are critical, crisis moments - filled with danger and opportunity. How we respond, how we decide at such moments determines our destiny.

History is a tale of judgment and grace because it is a flow of moments punctuated by Kairos times - moments of crisis. God's purposes will be fulfilled, but the part we play is determined by the response we make. We are always caught in the tension between the way of the world and the way of Jesus.

The way of the world seems so real.

The way of Jesus seems so futile - indeed, it leads to crucifixion.

But the paradox is that the apparent conquest of worldly ways ends in death and destruction and the way of Jesus leads through death to resurrection.

Today we remember Jerusalem's crisis. Today we know that we, too, stand in crisis:

To preserve our life,
or to lose it for the sake of the Gospel.
To play it safe, to secure ourselves, to operate with worldly wisdom,
or to trust God and follow Jesus in the ways of peace.

Our world is full of crises: The Israeli-Palestinian conflict reminds us so starkly of Jesus' words and weeping. Northern Ireland, South Africa, Central America.

Christ Community - called anew to total commitment to the ministry of grace, healing and care.

And each of us - to find our peace in Jesus.