

St. Mary's Episcopal Church

Message by Michael Burke

March 17, 2024 / Fourth Sunday of Lent • [Jeremiah 31:31-34](#), [Hebrews 5:5-10](#), and [John 12:20-33](#).



## *Christa*

Good morning. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday, the Sunday of the Passion. We will hear the powerful story of redemption, and journey through the final week in the life of Jesus that leads up to both the cross of Good Friday and the resurrection of Easter.

And because it is our custom at St. Mary's to not have a sermon or homily on Palm Sunday, but to let the Passion narrative stand alone in all its power, allow me to take a few minutes to speak about that story and what is to come.

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<sup>1</sup> Image copyright by [passionofagoddess.com](http://passionofagoddess.com).

Now – this next part is tricky – because it is a gross oversimplification, and I really shouldn't be attempting to do this even in two hours, let alone two minutes, but here we go:

**Why did Jesus die?** I'm not asking here about the mechanics, either of the crucifixion, nor of the conspiracy of various motives, those of the religious leaders and those of the Roman Empire, nor of the hostile reaction of the crowds. **But, theologically, how do we begin to think theologically about the cross and resurrection?**

A number of you may have grown up learning various theological “explanations” or “theories” of how it was that Christ's death on the cross opened for us the way of everlasting life. One of those theories of what we call “the Atonement” was that Christ “paid the price for us” of human sin.

And remember, when we are speaking of such things, we are using what scholars sometimes call “the-poetic language”<sup>2</sup>. Theo-poetic language uses metaphors, comparing one thing to another, all the while recognizing that it is not *literally* the thing we are comparing it to. For example, we might say, “She is an open book,” meaning “she has nothing to hide; all the while knowing that she is *not* literally a book. Metaphors are always drawn from human experience; and metaphors in one time and culture and set of human experiences will not necessarily “work” or “make sense” in another, different context, time, or culture.

But in thinking of such things, let us be careful not to be smug. Our forebearers in faith were neither stupid nor naïve, and they thought clearly and deeply about theology. However, our post-modern and Western human experience is so very different; we live today in a different world of meaning than they did. Even so, there are hierarchical and economically stratified cultures even today in which the particular metaphors of the ancient church still hold much meaning and relevance.

In a few of the earliest Christian writings, the purposes achieved by the crucifixion was spoken in the language that the devil had taken humanity “captive,” and God, in the person of Jesus, paid the “ransom” demanded, and thus God paid the price due for our redemption from sin, brokenness, and the power of evil.

But others in the early church were troubled by the use of that metaphor.

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theopoetics>

To them it made evil or “the devil” more powerful than God, that God had to capitulate to a hostage-taker, in essence, and give in to their demands in paying a ransom. So, many re-thought the “ransom” metaphor, explaining that it wasn’t the power of evil, (personified by the term “the devil”) that required the death of Jesus, but it was God’s *honor* that required God to simply “buy” or “ransom” us back. The ancient near East, as you may know, was a deeply “honor and shame’ based culture, and that made a lot of sense in that context. Even today, in many villages in so-called “honor and shame-based cultures<sup>3</sup>”, people would do unspeakable things<sup>4</sup> to their own offspring to protect the honor of the family.

As Christianity moved into the Roman world, however, it moved into a culture more oriented around “law and order’ than honor. And for every transgression of the law, there is a penalty that must be paid. Nobody really questioned that, it was simply a given of the time and culture. So, some thought, since humanity could not possibly pay the price of their own ransom, or as a penalty for their warlike and erring ways, God paid that price for us in his own Self, in the person of Jesus.

Later in history, Christian thought developed different, some would say, much more satisfying and much less problematic or disturbing metaphors to explain the mystery of the crucifixion and resurrection. They would leave the thinking about “paying penalties and satisfying a debt” largely behind, and would instead think of “ransom” in terms of the liberation of humanity from the bondage of sin, brokenness, and eternal death.

In the death and resurrection of Christ, we learn something of the transformative, redemptive power of God in creation. Between now and Easter, we will be drawn into the story of the events of Holy Week and Easter, which tells of how the power of “evil’, that is, the domination system over humanity, and all our brokenness, is shattered, and new life comes out of death, destruction and decay. And we learn something about ourselves as embodied human beings: that our existence and purpose is larger than the limited portion of life that we can see today. And that we are created for life and love, and that it is Love alone which endures when all else has passed from our eyes.

In this Gospel passage today, taken from the Gospel according to John, Jesus is speaking of his death, and he doesn’t speak at all in terms of penalties due, or ransoms paid. At all. Jesus himself

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<sup>3</sup> See: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honour#:~:text=Honour-based%20cultures%20are%20also%20known%20as%20honour-shame%20cultures,those%20of%20post-%20sexual%20revolution%20and%20egalitarian%20societies.>; and [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guilt%E2%80%93shame%E2%80%93fear\\_spectrum\\_of\\_cultures.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guilt%E2%80%93shame%E2%80%93fear_spectrum_of_cultures) and L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and their Implications for Today*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press & London: SCM Press, 1988.

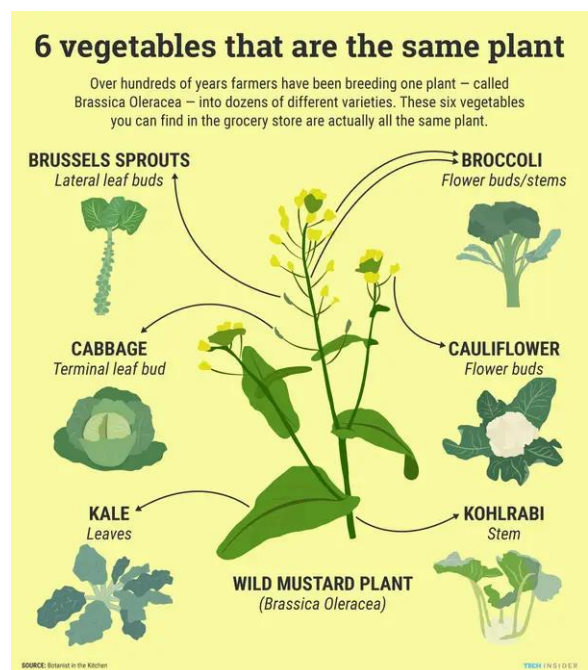
<sup>4</sup> See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honor\\_killing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honor_killing)

uses a different metaphor, that of the seed that, which to our limited and “above ground” eyes, dies and is buried in the ground. And yet, it is the seed that transforms death into life, as it germinates and brings forth life that is both new and changed. **Jesus said, “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ”**

We can learn much more from this than we can mention this morning. Part of which is, **the Incarnation really matters**. In other words, how it is that Christ is embodied in the world makes all the difference. At the heart of the Christian story, in Jesus, we see God’s own Self embodied as human. In entering most deeply into the experience of being human, God becomes almost-one with us, sharing our human pain as well as joys. And Christ’s victory over sin, brokenness, death, and evil, becomes our victory as well. We are transformed *in Christ*, into a new creation.

Maybe that’s a part of why I am endlessly fascinated with growing things from seed.

Since we are talking about seeds, let me try out an analogy: **What do broccoli, kale, cabbage, kohlrabi, cauliflower, brussels sprouts, and mustard have in common?** That’s right, they are all the same plant. The Latin name is *Brassica oleracea*.<sup>5</sup> Over centuries, gardeners have bred the plant so that different parts of the plant express themselves differently. But, again, they are all the same plant. **How they are expressed, or (to use a term badly) how they are embodied, makes all the difference.**



In the Gospel passage for today, some Greeks ask Philip, “Sir, we want to see Jesus.” You could build an entire movie around that one sentence, couldn’t you? An entire novel.

Sir, we want to see Jesus. Well, don’t we all?

So... This past week I went to see Jesus... (pause) Christ Superstar.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.businessinsider.com/broccoli-kale-brussels-sprouts-vegetables-all-the-same-plant-2015-11>

Thursday night was opening night for the all-female cast production of the 1971 musical Jesus Christ Superstar.

Not at the PAC, not at the Dena'ina, but where you want to see it: at Mad Myna's club here in downtown Anchorage.

Now, it is fair to say that I am not a big fan of musical theatre. That is true. This production was wonderful!

( BTW, tickets are entirely sold out. But I'm going again, and I have some extra tickets for this upcoming Friday night at 7pm; see me after the service if you are interested. )

But what was most interesting is the ways in which the basic story felt different for me when embodied by women. Jesus, Judas, Caiaphas, the high priest, Pilate the Roman governor of Judea, all of them. This is true even though the score, and the dialogue was unchanged from the original , largely male, 1971 casting.

If you go (and it is all sold out now), I would like to find a way for us to get together, and reflect, because I am interested in how the story was the same or different as told by women's movement, gestures, facial expressions, and bodies.

At this point, I will only say this: I made a huge difference for me.

Again, Embodiment matters.

And then, last Thursday night. I went to see Jesus again.

Not at Myrna's. But online, this time.

Thursday night, as you may have seen in the newsletter post from *last week*, last Thursday, was the opening of the movie "The Philadelphia Eleven".<sup>6</sup> on the ordination of the first women to be priests in The Episcopal Church. It has been in research, writing, and production for what seems like a long time. I believe St. Mary's contributed financially to one of the very earliest rounds of funding many years ago.

It is spectacular. Of course we would find it spectacular, it is our own history. At the end of the movie, there was a picture of the Rev. Diane Tickell, one of those first women, ordained in the

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years just before such ordinations of women were approved by General Convention. Diane spent a portion of her ministry in this period here in formation at St. Mary's. It has been said that she stood at the altar to the side of the the-Rector Chuck Eddy during the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, in the years before the ordination of women was sanctioned. The movie of course, is the story of us, in the Episcopal Church, and the ongoing struggle to be the whole people of God. In 1974 that meant acknowledging that the Holy Spirit was raising up and calling women to the priesthood, and likely had been for centuries while the Church could not, would not hear it. And it is the story of how the Spirit moved among us to change hearts and minds and delegate votes. And the reception of this change in the movement within parishes to embrace this New Thing that She – (the Holy Spirit) was doing.

But for me, watching it unfold on film was also a deeply moving experience of the Incarnation. The stories of the women in this movie are the people whose lives and witness are the very reason that I have been an Episcopal priest for the last 28 years. When I saw people like Barbara Harris, Carter Heyward, and Allison Cheek, I saw Jesus. I knew none of them very well personally, but from afar, and in their writings or public ministry. But I was formed for faith and ministry by those who were ordained in the decade to follow. The 1974 ordinations of women happened because the spirit of Jesus was embodied in women - in the hallways outside the House of Bishops and Deputies, sharing stories, being a witness. It was women clergy like Gayle Harris, Ellen Wondra, and Leslie Adams who were my mentors, just as the lay women at St. Mary's were my mentors, my inspiration and my family. IF I have any courage or wisdom at all, (and I do say "if") it was theirs which they formed within me. When I see their faces, even now, or in some cases, in memory, I see Jesus. .

Embodiment matters. Incarnation matters, It is how we see Jesus. When we see Jesus, we see the Heart of God, the Love of God. This is the mystery of the Incarnation: God's Love dressed up in human skin.

After all, that's the meaning that lies behind the word "glorify," in the Gospel for today. It's a curious word, isn't it? In theology, one of the meanings of Glorify: To make visible what is obscured or otherwise hidden.

The Scriptures tell us that God loved humanity so much that God entered as deeply as possible into the human story – (John 3:16) as close as possible – experiencing not just the best but also the worst of human love and compassion as well as fear and violence.

And in doing so, everything changes!

I will see you outside the gates of Jerusalem, in the weeks to come. Amen.





*"Christa" circa 1993 by Mike Roberts, Rochester NY.*

## The Collect

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

## Old Testament - Jeremiah 31:31-34

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

## The Psalm - Psalm 51:1-13

1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving-kindness; \*  
in your great compassion blot out my offenses.

2 Wash me through and through from my wickedness \*  
and cleanse me from my sin.

3 For I know my transgressions, \*  
and my sin is ever before me.

4 Against you only have I sinned \*  
and done what is evil in your sight.

5 And so you are justified when you speak \*  
and upright in your judgment.

6 Indeed, I have been wicked from my birth, \*  
a sinner from my mother's womb.

7 For behold, you look for truth deep within me, \*  
and will make me understand wisdom secretly.



8 Purge me from my sin, and I shall be pure; \*  
wash me, and I shall be clean indeed.

9 Make me hear of joy and gladness, \*  
that the body you have broken may rejoice.

10 Hide your face from my sins \*  
and blot out all my iniquities.

11 Create in me a clean heart, O God, \*  
and renew a right spirit within me.

12 Cast me not away from your presence \*  
and take not your holy Spirit from me.

13 Give me the joy of your saving help again \*  
and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit.

*or*

### **Psalm 119:9-16**

9 How shall a young man cleanse his way? \*  
By keeping to your words.

10 With my whole heart I seek you; \*  
let me not stray from your commandments.

11 I treasure your promise in my heart, \*  
that I may not sin against you.

12 Blessed are you, O Lord; \*  
instruct me in your statutes.

13 With my lips will I recite \*  
all the judgments of your mouth.

14 I have taken greater delight in the way of your decrees \*  
than in all manner of riches.

15 I will meditate on your commandments \*  
and give attention to your ways.

16 My delight is in your statutes; \*  
I will not forget your word.

## **The Epistle - Hebrews 5:5-10**

Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him,

“You are my Son,  
today I have begotten you”;

as he says also in another place,

“You are a priest forever,  
according to the order of Melchizedek.”

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

## **The Gospel - John 12:20-33**

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

## From Frederick Buechner

Buechner's thoughts on salvation, originally from [Wishful Thinking](#) and reprinted in [Beyond Words](#):

SALVATION IS AN EXPERIENCE first and a doctrine second.

Doing the work you're best at doing and like to do best, hearing great music, having great fun, seeing something very beautiful, weeping at somebody else's tragedy—all these experiences are related to the experience of salvation because in all of them two things happen: (1) you lose yourself, and (2) you find that you are more fully yourself than usual.

A closer analogy is the experience of love. When you love somebody, it is no longer yourself who is the center of your own universe. It is the one you love who is. You forget yourself. You deny yourself. You give of yourself, so that by all the rules of arithmetical logic there should be less of yourself than there was to start with. Only by a curious paradox there is more. You feel that at last you really are yourself.

The experience of salvation involves the same paradox. Jesus put it like this: "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 10:39).

You give up your old self-seeking self for somebody you love and thereby become yourself at last. You must die with Christ so that you can rise with him, Paul says. It is what baptism is all about.

You do not love God so that, tit for tat, he will then save you. To love God is to be saved. To love anybody is a significant step along the way.

You do not love God and live for him so you will go to Heaven. Whichever side of the grave you happen to be talking about, to love God and live for him is Heaven.

It is a gift, not an achievement.

You can make yourself moral. You can make yourself religious. But you can't make yourself love.

"We love," John says, "Because he first loved us." (1 John 4:19)

Who knows how the awareness of God's love first hits people. We all have our own tales to tell, including those of us who wouldn't believe in God if you paid us. Some moments happen in your life that you say yes to right up to the roots of your hair, that makes it worth having been born just to have happen. Laughing with somebody till the tears run down your cheeks. Waking up to the first snow. Being in bed with somebody you love.

Whether you thank God for such a moment or thank your lucky stars, it is a moment that is trying to open up your whole life. If you turn your back on such a moment and hurry along to business as usual, it

may lose you the ball game. If you throw your arms around such a moment and bless it, it may save your soul.

How about the person you know who as far as you can possibly tell has never had such a moment—one of those soreheads and slobes of the world, the ones the world has hopelessly crippled? Maybe for that person the moment that has to happen is you.

It is a process, not an event.