

3.21.2021 Passion Sunday (John 8:46-59)

The season of Lent is our opportunity to fast and pray and sacrifice so that we may fix our hearts and minds on a path that leads to the death of the Son of God on a Cross at Calvary. Within this season is a time called Passiontide, which begins today. This morning, on Passion Sunday, we begin to focus even more carefully on the Passion and Death of our Savior Christ. So, no matter how those lenten sacrifices have gone for you up to this point, now is the time, as St. Paul would say, to more earnestly “*set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth*” (Colossians 3:2), that you may actively participate and truly receive the grace that God intends to give us through these holy mysteries.

In our Gospel reading this morning, we heard Jesus declare, “*Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I AM*” (John 8:58), and when His enemies pick up stones to throw at Him, we see that for once they understood Him perfectly. In fact, they understood in His words a claim many people fail to see, that Jesus Christ stands before us not simply as a good man, a prophet, or a great teacher, but instead, as the Creator of Heaven and Earth. He stands before us as the very Word that was spoken in darkness, the Creator who formed the sea and the land, the one, true God who made man and woman in His own image and likeness.

The religious leaders chose to take “*up stones to cast at Him*” (John 8:59) and kill Him, because they understood exactly what Jesus meant when He said, “*Before Abraham was, I AM,*” and these verses of Holy Scripture are read on every Passion Sunday, so that when we see our *Lord* and our *God* (John 20:28) freely and deliberately moving toward His Passion and Death, we may be reminded of who Jesus is, and was, and will always be: The Eternal Second Person of the Holy Trinity, The Divine Son of God clothed in human flesh, The “*one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all people*” (1 Timothy 2:5-6).

There are many people today who believe that Jesus never claimed to be God, but when you read this passage one thing is perfectly clear, the people who were present that day, those who heard Him speak these words, all knew exactly who He claimed to be, and they took up stones in an attempt to permanently silence Him because His claim was infinitely more than they

would accept. His claim to be the Creator is still infinitely more than many people will accept. In the first century some people thought they could silence Jesus by killing Him, twenty centuries later we see that didn't work, yet over the years we've come up with other ways to try to silence Him.

Instead of taking up stones, sometimes we try to silence Jesus by trusting ourselves instead of placing our lives entirely in His hands. The book of Proverbs (3:5-6) tells us to "*Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths.*" God is the infinite, all-powerful, all-wise, and all-loving Creator of Heaven and Earth. We are finite, limited, fallen creatures. Yet, all too often in our day to day lives we charge forward relying on our own ability, our own strength, and our own understanding instead of personally and prayerfully asking the Lord to direct our path. I won't speak for you, but I know me, and I've found that my understanding could often be described more accurately as mis-understanding. God sees clearly what we cannot, so we must not try to silence Him by trusting ourselves, but instead acknowledge Him, prayerfully seek His will, and patiently wait for His direction.

Instead of taking up stones, or offering Judas thirty pieces of silver to betray Him, sometimes we try to silence Jesus by accepting Him as our Savior, but not as our Lord. We've all "*sinned and fall short of the glory of God*" (Romans 3:23), and when we begin to come to terms with the depth of our fall, there's no sweeter sound than God's amazing grace. There's nothing more comforting than knowing that we don't have to rely on our own good works or stand on our own two feet and plead our case before the Infinitely Holy Creator of Heaven and Earth. In Christ, we have an Advocate, a Mediator, and a Savior. Yet, as St. Paul writes, we must not receive "*the grace of God in vain*" (2 Corinthians 6:1). God's grace is given not only for our forgiveness, His grace is given that we may be made Redeemed and made a *new creation* in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). In the book of Romans we read that "*our old man,*" the person we used to be, was "*crucified with Him*" (Romans 6:6). Now, with Christ as our Savior and our Lord, we are branches on the true Vine that bear fruit a hundredfold (John 15:1-15). We are living members of His Body who love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, who reach out with His love to the world He gave His life to save.

Instead of taking up stones, or sending the Temple guards to the Garden of Gethsemane to arrest Him, sometimes we try to silence Jesus by turning away from Him and focusing our attention on all this world has to offer. C.S. Lewis said, “Aim at heaven and you will get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you get neither.” So, whether it’s the seed that fell on thorny ground and was choked by the “*cares, riches, and pleasures of life*” (Luke 8:14), or the rich young man who “*went away sorrowful*” (Matthew 19:22) after Jesus told Him to sell his possessions and give to the poor, we try to silence Jesus when we “aim at earth,” when the things this world has to offer are more appealing to us than an eternal relationship with our Lord.

Instead of taking up stones, or convincing Pontius Pilate to crucify Him, sometimes we try to silence Jesus by never being silent in His presence. Throughout the Gospels we see Jesus withdrawing from the crowds and the noise to be alone with His Father. For example, in Mark’s Gospel we read that Jesus awoke “*a great while before day*” (Mark 1:35) and went into a solitary place and prayed. Our Lord knew the importance of quiet time, alone with God, and so He woke up early to pray, and if our desire is to be more like Him, we should also seek such solitude and silence that we may be able to listen to God and hear what He’s saying to us.

We can try to silence Jesus by trusting ourselves instead of relying on Him completely, by accepting Him as our Savior but not as our Lord, by turning away from Him to focus on all this world has to offer, or by never taking time to be silent in His presence; but in the end, the creature can’t silence the Creator. They took up stones to cast at Him, Judas betrayed Him, the Temple guards arrested Him, and the Romans crucified Him, yet here we are today because *He built His Church and “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it”* (Matthew 16:18). This morning, as we begin to focus even more carefully on the Passion and Death of our Savior, may God give us grace to open our hearts, our souls, and our minds to His message of Divine love proclaimed from the Cross, the Gospel truth that “*God so loved the world (God so loved you) that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life*” (John 3:16).