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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/17/2011, Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday
Matthew 26:14--27:66
Struck Down but not Destroyed¹

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The story of our Lord's passion is so rich in meaning for our world that the preacher could probably dive in at any point, as if throwing a dart, and find a passage worthy of lifting up. This year I find myself drawn to the arrest scene in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus is conscious of his power, but he declines to use it. If he had so chosen, he could have escaped the arrest. But he did not. Why? The ultimate answer is, you! If Jesus will not do himself harm, no one else *can* -- not even the combined power of soldiers and guards, Caiaphas and Pilate, the mighty Roman Empire, nor sin, death, nor even the Devil himself. The only true way to harm Jesus would be to make him give up on you. And that he will never do! So, he lets slip away the twelve legions of angels who could easily have rescued him. Here, then, is the passage that has so caught my attention:

⁵¹And behold, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword, and struck the slave of the high priest, and cut off his ear. ⁵²Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. ⁵³Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? (Matthew 26:51-53, RSV)

Now, I want to go back to the way I phrased things just a few moments ago. What I said was this:

"The only true way to harm Jesus would be to make him give up on you. And that he will never do!"

I had to struggle some to come up with this phrasing, because I want to speak of Christ's victory as somehow *above and out of reach* of his sufferings, but I do not want to short-change those sufferings. I do not want to underestimate either his suffering or you own. I am seeking to walk along a balance beam. I want to affirm that people injured Jesus, and yet at the same time, I want to say that he was not

¹ This sermon owes much to St. John Chrysostom's beautiful essay *A Treatise to Prove That No One Can Harm the Man Who Does Not Injure Himself*. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf109.xvi.html> Strangely, Chrysostom does not illustrate his thesis by referring to Jesus. He refers to Job, Joseph, the Three Young Men in the Furnace, and St. Paul, for example, but not Jesus. Still, I should think his whole treatise is inspired by meditation on the story of Jesus.

injured! And the fact that he was not injured was not because he somehow did not feel pain, for he did feel pain and sorrow, same as you and me. It was rather that the only way to really harm Jesus would be to make him give up on you, and that he would not do! So, people could strike Jesus. They could even pound nails into him and thrust a spear into his heart. Yet they could not injure him in the profound sense of disarranging his soul and causing him to lose the thing he cared most about: you! If Jesus would not injure himself that way, none could do it to him.

The Apostle Paul points to the same thing when he describes the hard life of the apostles:

⁸We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; (2 Corinthians 4:8-9, RSV)

So it was concerning Jesus: he was struck down, but not destroyed, for the only way he could be destroyed would be for him to run away and leave us to be destroyed by sin, death, and the devil. But that he would never do.

The same thing is true for you and for me: Many people and forces might strike blows against us, yet none can really injure us if we do not injure ourselves. For we are made “for good works,” as the apostle put it (Ephesians 2:10) and none can deprive us of those good works if we do not deprive ourselves of them.

If you do not harm yourself in your soul, none else can. If you do not destroy your righteousness and innocence, none else can. Not really. Time and its setbacks, along with mean people, might injure you, yet in a way you cannot be harmed, for the chief things about you - your faith, your piety, your integrity - are not in their hands, but yours.

But Pastor, you might say, surely Jesus suffered many deep blows in the Passion story we just read. He was insulted and mocked. He was deprived of his freedom. And in the end, he was deprived of life itself. All true! And yet, he was not injured in these things, not in the center of his life, for nothing robbed him of his integrity, nothing shook him from his mission. Nothing caused him to forsake you, to forsake me. Nothing had the power to deprive him of victory if he would not deprive himself. If anyone wanted to strike Jesus a deep blow, it would be to force him to give up on us. But none had such power. None have such power over you and me either. So, this is a sermon inviting us to rejoice in our freedom to be good, to merrily go on our way toward faith and piety, regardless of how much the world might huff and puff and try to blow us away.

So, let us consider those blows mentioned earlier: Jesus was indeed insulted and mocked. He was indeed deprived of his liberty, his possessions, and his youth. And in the end he was killed. Yet in all this, he remained a conqueror. All those ills simply had their day. They will all give way one day, and Jesus will shine forth with a superabundant splendor. So will we if we be true, because of what the good Jesus accomplished in his faithfulness.

Let us consider the blows he suffered, then, one by one. And let us note the incapacity of those blows to deprive Jesus of his chief concern: that you and I should be saved.

First, then: Jesus was insulted and mocked. “He has uttered blasphemy,” it was said of him. And it was no light charge either, but one solemnly delivered by the High Priest himself. Your reputation, my reputation -- our good name is one of the most precious possessions we have. And if the High Priest should disparage us, that is quite a blow. His judgment is powerful and influences the opinion of many folk. So, Caiaphas did this thing: he deprived Jesus of his good name. Then the onlookers abused him:

⁶⁷Then they spat in his face, and struck him; and some slapped him,
⁶⁸saying, “Prophesy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?”
(Matthew 26:67-68, RSV)

Later that night, the guards did similar things:

²⁷Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the praetorium, and they gathered the whole battalion before him. ²⁸And they stripped him and put a scarlet robe upon him, ²⁹and plaiting a crown of thorns they put it on his head, and put a reed in his right hand. And kneeling before him they mocked him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” ³⁰And they spat upon him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. (Matthew 27:27-30, RSV)

These insulting things happened to Jesus, and yet, in a way, they could not touch him, for they could not stop him from his steadfast work to save you and me. Jesus had anticipated such things much earlier in his story, back in the Sermon on the Mount, and he had given the counsel that now he himself lives by:

But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. (Matthew 5:39, KJV)

It is a provocation, an intolerable injustice, that Jesus should be buffeted and spat upon and cruel thorns pressed into his head. Yet none of this had the power to harm his virtue. None of these hard things were hard enough to cause our Lord to betray his tremendous preaching from the Sermon on the Mount:

⁴³Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. ⁴⁴But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; (Matthew 5:43-44, KJV)

Let it be so with you and me too. There is something awfully impressive about one who though he or she is cursed, curses not in return. It catches the attention of the world when insults cannot so shake a person that they deprive that person of calmness and faith. Answer back with truth, but not with wrath. Do not let insults be your undoing. One day, your reputation will emerge whole from the insults. Indeed it was so even in the brief space of time of our Lord's passion. At one point he was spat upon and mocked. Yet shortly thereafter, the sublime truth was spoken aloud concerning him:

Now when the centurion, and they that were with him, watching Jesus, saw the earthquake, and those things that were done, they feared greatly, saying, Truly this was the Son of God. (Matthew 27:54, KJV)

People tried to injure Jesus on that day of his Passion, but they *could not* harm his soul, and in the end, his good name was vindicated.

The second suffering on my mind was that our Lord's freedom was taken away from him. He was arrested, and he was not released. So came to an end his mastery of his own movements. No longer could he enter some village and heal those who gathered round him: the blind, the leper, the halt. No longer could he visit the home of his friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. No longer could he spend the night on yon mountain alone in prayer.

Pity the prisoner. It is with good reason that in our church prayers we often pray for "prisoners and those who guard them," for prisons are dangerous places, and those within them are subject to temptations and to despair. And though the prisoner might deserve to be there, judged guilty fair and square of a crime he in fact committed, still it is a kind of suffering to lose one's freedom.

So it was with Jesus in that night of his betrayal. They "seized Jesus" (Matthew 26:57). They laid rough hands on him, determined that he should not escape them. Nor did they let him go until at last they riveted him down with nails through his flesh. So it was that Jesus was bound by his enemies and his freedom taken away.

And yet, in another sense, they could not touch his freedom and had no power to deprive him of that liberty that really mattered to him: liberty of soul, freedom to love his heavenly Father and to love you and me. Wrap ten-thousand chains around him. Bind him tighter that the Philistines bound Samson of old. It matters now, for he retains the right to hold his head up as a free man in this world, not bowed down by sin, not bending the knee to cowardice, and never betraying his mission to save you and me.

We human beings are capable of that: of retaining dignity and freedom though we languish in prison. Joseph of old was like that – the patriarch sold by his brothers into Egyptian slavery. There in slavery, he refused to have an affair with Potiphar's wife, with the result that he was thrown into a dungeon. Yet he showed no fear, no despair, as if he were a prince and he won the respect of others. The same was true for the three young men thrown into Nebuchadnezzar's burning,

fiery furnace. They walked as free men amidst those flames – a foretaste of the freedom and dignity God himself saw in them.

And then, in our modern world, we have the example of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who though cast into prison by the Nazi government and soon to be hanged, nonetheless conducted himself with grace and faith in that prison, “like a squire from his country-house.”²

In the end, true freedom is to walk in the way of the Lord. To use the words of St. Paul, to be free is to become a “slave of righteousness.”

¹⁷But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, ¹⁸and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. (Romans 6:11-18, RSV)

Now, glad to say you folks are not prisoners. I can tell that because here you are, safe and sound in church. And yet for many of you, you are bound by the good monastic virtue called “stability.” That is, you occupy positions of responsibility in this world, and you are not really free to pick up and move on. In conscience, you are not free to simply wander. You have marriages and families, colleagues and employees depending on you. You have patients you treat or counsel, clients who depend on your legal or financial advice, students you teach or young people you mentor. Besides all that, you have friends. Other people looking on might think it strange that you should have the particular group of friends you do, but, what can you say? They are your friends, bound to by chords that tug on your heart.

One of the most heartbreaking lines in the Passion Story we just read is the one about the disciples, how they abandoned Jesus:

Then all the disciples forsook him and fled. (Matthew 26:56, RSV)

But that is what Jesus would not do to them. Whether Jesus was bound by chains or by the chords of friendship, he remained free, with his head up and his conscience clean. If he would not submit to the yoke of slavery, none could make him do so.

Finally, in this strange calculus of others injuring Jesus and yet him not being injured there is the matter of his death. Others injured him. Indeed they did. They pressed the thorns into his brow, they hammered spikes into his body, they thrust the spear into his side. They mocked him and spat upon him, and Pilate condemned him to be crucified. Many are guilty of injuring Jesus, and yet none injured Jesus – not in that which mattered most to him: you!

Jesus had spoken of this too earlier in his career, back in the Sermon on the Mount:

² From his poem, “Who Am I?” <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=385>

²⁴Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. ²⁵For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. ²⁶For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? (Matthew 16:24, KJV)

This is the one injury sin, death, and the devil could not lay upon Jesus: they could never force him to so save his life in such a way that he loses it. And for all their violence against him, they could never take his life in such a way as to deprive him of life.

And that, my friends, is the story for next Sunday, Easter Sunday. Return then and hear of the raising up of this man who if he does not cast himself down, can never really be cast down by others. They never did that thing, nor could they, because you mean simply too much to our Saviour Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Amen.