

Pastor Kenneth Mars
Immanuel Lutheran Church – Burns, WY
Good Friday
April 2, 2021
Text: John 18–19

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Tonight's reading from John 18–19 begins with a question spoken by Jesus to a band of soldiers sent from the chief priests and Pharisees to arrest Him, "Whom do you seek?" It's a question worth pondering. All of you have chosen to gather at 203 Washington Avenue in Burns, Wyoming, on a gorgeous spring evening. Some of you have traveled a good distance to be here. What or whom are you all seeking? Like most things, all of us may have various reasons and motivations for being here tonight. The liturgy for Good Friday's Tenebrae service provides us with the true answer to our question about Jesus. Later in this service, we will hear it during the "Solemn Respect for the Cross." Three times we will say in responsive conversation. I will say, "Behold the life-giving cross on which was hung the salvation of the world." You will respond collectively, "Oh, come, let us worship him." The true reason for gathering tonight is to behold, to look at through saving faith born in us by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel, the life-giving cross on which was hung the salvation of the world. And then, having seen Him, we worship. Tonight, we come to see Jesus of Nazareth, the incarnate Son of God, the King of truth and love, crucified for the life of the world.

That's not the answer the soldiers gave when Jesus asked them whom they were seeking. The soldiers' answer was correct and accurate as far as it goes, "Jesus of Nazareth." Though born in Bethlehem's manger some 6 miles southwest of Jerusalem, He grew up in Joseph and Mary's hometown of Nazareth in northern Galilee. But they don't know and believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. It's quite likely they are simply soldiers obeying the orders of their superiors. "Go arrest Jesus of Nazareth. Judas Iscariot, one of His close disciples, will point Him out. Jesus of Nazareth is a menace to our Jewish laws and customs. He must be stopped. Bind Him and bring Him back to Annas and Caiaphas." As far as the soldiers were concerned, they were looking for a criminal named Jesus of Nazareth, no more, no less.

But they found more than they expected. Twice, Jesus asked, "Whom do you seek?" After each question, the soldiers responded with "Jesus of Nazareth." Each time, our

Lord identified Himself as, “I am he.” But something curious happened the first time Jesus said, “I am he.” The soldiers “drew back and fell to the ground.” They came looking for a criminal. What they found was a man speaking with the authority and dignity of the Lord God almighty. For it was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel who identified Himself as the “I am” in Exodus 3. The powers of darkness were coming for Jesus. But He, the light of world, has shined into the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. They fell back and submitted to the God come in human flesh. They could not arrest Jesus without His consent. The darkness could not overcome Him.

Jesus allowed Himself to be arrested only after He declared “I am he” the second time and commanded the soldiers to let His disciples go. Even here, we see the substitutionary work of Jesus on behalf of the world. He gives Himself up freely to inferior powers so that His people can be set free forever. The soldiers expected to find a man named Jesus from Nazareth. What they found was the divine Savior of the world willingly giving Himself over to betrayal, arrest, and eventually to death by crucifixion. We gather tonight to “behold the life-giving cross on which was hung the salvation of the world.”

In the course of time, Jesus was taken to the governor’s headquarters for interrogation before Pontius Pilate. He too seeks to learn more about this man causing such concern among the Jewish leadership. It’s unclear what Pilate may have thought about Jesus before his interview with the Lord. Being a politician and a governmental authority, it makes sense that Pilate’s first question was political in nature, “Are you the king of the Jews?” From Pilate’s perspective, there could only be one answer to that question. No, you are not the king of the Jews. Even the Jews arrayed against Jesus confessed, “We have no king but Caesar.” Jesus cannot be the King of the Jews. No sane person would say otherwise.

Pilate did not expect to find a man speaking with an authority and depth of truth never before encountered, not even among the highest authorities of the Roman imperial government. Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not of this world.” So, says Pilate, “you are a king?” Once again Jesus confesses, “For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.”

Jesus is a king, for this purpose He was born and came into the world. But He is not like any king ever in human history, past or present. His kingdom is established upon truth. Not truths, plural, as if there can be multiple, competing, equally valid truth claims. That's the nonsense common in our day; your truth is your truth, my truth is my truth and they don't have to agree. Christ's kingdom, by contrast, is established upon the truth. And Jesus is that truth for he is the King of truth. All other kingdoms and governments of the world come and go with the changing currents of time, history, and circumstances. But not this kingdom. It is eternal for it is built upon King Jesus, the truth.

But the lies and falsehoods of this world cannot tolerate the truth. So, it must be destroyed. Pilate tried to stop the injustice, at least, to a certain extent. He told the Jews Jesus had done nothing to deserve death. So I will release Him for that is my custom, to release a criminal during the Passover. Strange justice, trying to release an innocent man due to custom rather than truth. But the Jews wouldn't stand for it; they were interested in everything but the truth. So give us the criminal Barabbas. Yet again, we see the substitutionary work of Jesus on behalf of the world. The world's justice, represented by Pontius Pilate, stands before the King of truth and can't manage to engage Him with truth and justice. But Jesus faces error and political gamesmanship with love and grace. Let Barabbas go free even though in truth he desires to die for his crime. On the cross, the King of truth dies so that the world, which deserves death and judgment, can go free. Each of us is represented by Barabbas. Guilty. Condemned. But rescued by Him who is the King of truth crucified for us all. "Behold, the life-giving cross on which was hung the salvation of the world."

"So they took Jesus, and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called the place of a skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha...Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.'"

The soldiers sought for Jesus of Nazareth in the Garden of Gethsemane. Pontius Pilate interrogated the King of the Jews. Both found more than they expected. The soldiers met the divine Son of God protecting His disciples and giving Himself over to betrayal and death for the world. Pilate met the truth, divine eternal truth in the King of the Jews; His kingdom is not of this world. But now He is crucified for the world. Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.

Everyone comes to Jesus looking for something. What are you looking for in Jesus? The truth is He is the salvation of the world, your salvation, hung upon the life-giving cross. His cross gives life. That should cause us to pause. Didn't Jesus suffer and die? Isn't Golgotha a place of the skull? The place of dead, dry bones. Indeed it was. But Jesus of Nazareth, the King of Jews brought life and immortality to that dry, barren place. For He is life and light. Darkness, death, and deceit did not and cannot overcome Him. Nor can it overcome us who come to Jesus looking to Him for life and salvation. Moments before Jesus died, He cried out, "It is finished." The salvation of the world is finished, brought to its completion. Nothing more need be done. "Behold the life-giving cross on which was hung the salvation of the world."

There are only two responses to the life-giving cross. Absolute adoration or rejection. Rejection may seem to be the most normal and natural. Golgotha's cross was a brutal, bloody instrument of torture and death. But adoration and worship are the true and right responses. On the cross hung the salvation of the world. "Oh, come, let us worship Him." The cross gives life now only because of who hung on it. Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews. He is the King of truth, love, and goodness. He is life and resurrection. Therefore, we no longer fear death, hell, and the grave. Everyone who believes in Christ Jesus, though he die, yet shall he live. And everyone who lives and believes in Christ shall never die (John 11:26–26). The apostle Paul, in words of rich, deep devotion declared his desire to know Christ and Him crucified so that by any means, he may participate in Christ's resurrection (Phil. 3:10). As we look to the cross in worship, devotion, and love, we proclaim before heaven and earth, "I have been crucified with Christ...And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20).

The cross of Jesus is precious to us. For on the cross, the love of God was being demonstrated for all the world. It is the true symbol of divine, perfect love. God in Christ loving us eternally. That is reason enough to gather on a beautiful Spring day or any day to worship Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews. "Behold, the life-giving cross on which was hung the salvation of the world. Oh, come, let us worship Him."

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.