

June 9, 2019

Lesson 2: Jesus Seals the New Covenant

Scripture: Mark 14: 32-50; 15

Context:

Our lesson on covenant moves from the Last Supper to the crucifixion scene. After Jesus has the Last Supper, he is arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane and is brought to trial in front of Pilate, the Roman authority appointed to the region of Judea. Jesus has already been interrogated, tried, condemned, and sentenced by the Sanhedrin. The fate now lies in the hands of Pilate.

Only in Mark does the crowd take the initiative to ask Pilate to follow the custom of releasing a prisoner during the Passover. By introducing Barabbas, the Marcan account stresses that he is a participant in the resistance to the Roman authority, but the real focus is on the chief priests who manipulate the mindless mob.¹ Once they get them stirred up, they will have their victim ready to be set up for crucifixion and condemned at the hands of the state.

Following Jesus's trial and the release of Barabbas, Pilate experiences a failure of nerve and has Jesus whipped to satisfy those screaming for his blood. And so Jesus is taken and crucified on the cross. In this gut-wrenching scene, we see all the authorities vie for power: chief priests and elders, the civil authority Pilate, and a directionless crowd screaming for blood.² The one noble figure in the midst of it all is Jesus with his quiet dignity in which we see the real King and the real power.

The timing and manner of Jesus's death all point to allusions made in the Old Testament and to various themes from Mark that have prepared the audience for this point. Perhaps the most intriguing part of Jesus's crucifixion are the last words of Jesus. Jesus's cry of dereliction from verse thirty-four are from Psalm twenty-two, a psalm of mourning. Numerous commentators and scholars have written about the meaning of these words as well as what they mean about Jesus's humanity and divinity. For us, they are a reminder that our Lord knew pain and suffering.

The close of Jesus's crucifixion include those still expecting to see something strange with thoughts that he might cry to Elijah and he will ascend to the heavens. Instead, Jesus dies on the cross after a loud cry. The curtain of the sanctuary tears symbolizing the body being broken. It is a dramatic scene to round out the importance of the moment.

Perhaps most dramatic is the conversion of sorts that takes place at the foot of the cross. Jesus has been condemned to death by a Gentile, but it is first a Gentile after his death that will recognize him as the Son of God.³ Jesus's ministry comes full circle as he makes a new covenant with both old and new people.

¹ Lamar Williamson Jr., "Mark," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY, 1983), 271.

² *Ibid.*, 273.

³ *Ibid.*, 276.

Application

This week teaches us that covenant is not always the easiest concept to swallow. The Passion narrative is one of the bloodiest and most tragic scenes described in the Bible. Jesus, a man who has been innocent, goes from group to group where he is disrespected, dismissed, mocked, and then ultimately left to die. His friends have abandoned him and some of the very “leaders” who were supposed to be advocates of equality and justice have dismissed fair trial for the sake of getting their way. The scene was anything but pretty.

Often I think we do a disservice when we talk about the word covenant. Many of us probably think of marriage and how that is a covenant. We think of the beauty of the vows being made and even the wedding itself. We paint it as a beautiful thing that makes everyone excited.

But if we are honest about covenant, we have to admit there is usually some sacrifice in covenant. It is not tit for tat. For marriage, it means we give up our selfish tendencies to always have our way. In an ordination covenant, both the ordained and the church make commitments to each other that might test personal desires and cross political lines. In the case of Jesus, he gave up his life so that all might live and brought into a new relationship.

Yet in this new covenant, Jesus gave us all a new identity. In the covenant Jesus made with humanity in the cross, he offered forgiveness and lifted the burden of humanity trying to “earn” their salvation. He took it all when he died upon the cross.

What is beautiful about Jesus and his new covenant is that all were brought into the fold. The Gentile soldier who found himself at the foot of the cross was the first to recognize Jesus’s true power and the strength that he possessed. And he became a part of the fold without even realizing it.

In our own walk with Christ, I hope that we try to understand not only the power of Jesus’s death for us, but we also think about the own covenants we have made. Are we faithful in the covenants that we have made and do we take them as seriously as Jesus? None of us are perfect, but hopefully all of us can strive to be a part of the beautiful covenant that Jesus has made us.

All of us have made covenant. For those who are married, there is the covenant to be faithful to your spouse in good times and bad times, in sickness and in health. Are you doing so? In the church we make a covenant when we join the church to be a member with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness. Are you faithfully fulfilling those? If you are a member of the church you also made a covenant to nurture the little ones who are baptized and to also support your pastor. Do you do those things? If you’re a pastor, you made a covenant to be faithful to the United Methodist Church. Are you doing so by discouraging factionalism and keeping your ordination vow? Think about the sacrifice our Lord made and the covenant that occurred on the cross. And then think about where you are on your walk with Christ.

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