

"A Different Kind of King" 04/05/20 Pastor Lindsey Carnes

From the beginning of time our names have been written on the heart of God. Our lives have been etched in the palms of his hands. There is what appears to be a great contradiction in what we, like countless thousands, indeed millions of Christian churches, are doing today. We are celebrating how Jesus came riding into Jerusalem and was acclaimed by the common people as the Messiah - and we are ourselves acclaiming him as our Messiah and our Lord in the same manner. And then we are telling the story of how the common people - the same crowd that welcomed in the streets of the Holy City, called for his death just a few days later - for a death plotted by the rulers of the temple and by the religious leaders of the nation into which he was born.

They held signs of welcome, the signs of approval - the signs of the prayer, palm branches waving. "Lord, save us now." "Hosanna in the Highest." It wasn't long before the crowds lined the streets shaking their fists, holding signs of rejection, the sign of disgrace, the sign of torture, the sign of death.

From the beginning of time, the death of Christ Jesus was written upon the heart of God. From the beginning of time, *our names* have been written on the heart of God. Because from the beginning of time God has wanted us to *live*, rather than to *die*. God has wanted us to *be*—rather than to *not be*.

The Apostle John tells us the meaning of the Passion Story when he says, "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16) The glory of Jesus—the glory of God—is found in how God has entered into our contradictions and our craziness—and taken upon himself the death that should be ours. The glory of God—the glory of Jesus—is how he is raised on a cross before he is raised from the dead.

That can be a hard one for us to grasp. A hard one for us to accept. We don't like to think about death, especially our own. Insofar as Jesus died upon the cross for us, we'd like to remember the briefness of his suffering, and quickly shift our attention on how the stone was rolled away from the tomb three days later. Rather than reflecting upon how his hands were pierced by the nails, and his side pierced by a spear, and how he called out in agony as he breathed his last, we'd rather fast forward to Easter morning.

The story of the Passion of Jesus has never been intended to be a pretty story. It has been told through the centuries, not to condone or glorify violence. We retell this story in all of its ugliness to focus our attention on what his death was all about, on *what* it was for, and on *who* it was for. It was for the folk like you and me, folk who waved palm branches and who are more than able to acclaim Jesus their Lord and King one day and shook their fists and call for his death the next.

I heard tell of a guy one time who was arrested for telling others about Jesus. His response was quite similar. As the guards led him into the room, he brings in a large rock and places it upon the table. The officers are all quite confused and wonder why he has brought a rock. He quickly explains to them, that if they silence him and keep him from telling others of Jesus, that the rock will cry out. The men in the room all thought he was crazy, and they let him go. Amazing! John 3:16 “For God so loved the world...”—it stands there like a rock upon which the heresies of history have smashed and sunk. Over and over again we have tried to separate or combine the two. God—absent or transcendent, high above creation, indifferent to creation, just watching history. Or God—immanent, at one with creation, every tree and every brook pulsing with the creative power of life.

God's Love Is Unlimited. “For God so loved the world...” stands there against all our attempts to narrow and make specific God's love. Even the author of the Gospel faces the temptation to say that God doesn't love all humanity and history, God just loves his own: those whom Jesus has called out of the world. The disciples are spoken of as loving Jesus and are commanded to love one another, but they are never told to love the world. Even John seems a bit tempted to restrict the scope of Christian love to Christ and the church, and yet John can't get past this fact that love is the most adequate description of God's attitude toward all creation.

“For God so loved the world...” the whole world, all creation. We have compartmentalized life so that most of us think that God loves us and we need to serve him. But we aren't very good at thinking what it would mean if God loves political power and corporate structures and natural energies and vast space. Our failure to understand the whole meaning of “for God so loved the world” has meant we have not cared very well for the whole world, which we were made to be God's stewards of.

God's Love Is Unconditional. “For God so loved the world...” is the beginning of a declarative statement. It is a given. God's love is for all creation. So often that word is spoken as if it were conditional, as if God will love us only if we meet some condition. If you are righteous, God will love you. If you are educated and literate, God will love you. This phrase is our defense against thinking that God's love is some abstract and metaphysical emotion.

God is not distant and unconnected from creation. God loves this creation in time and history. God loves and acts and is involved with this combination of time and space, energy and matter, people and power. It is this cosmos that God is concerned to bring to fulfillment of his intentions in creation. God still loves this world and is still creating and working. Creation is still God's work. Creation continues to be sustained because God continues to love creation and sustain it.

God's Love Is Redemptive. “For God so loved the world...”—that love is the reason for God's continued actions to redeem and restore creation. God in Jesus Christ comes to save and to redeem. God gave himself in Jesus Christ with the desire and intention to redeem us. “For God so loved the world...” that he acted in Jesus Christ. Those of us who have felt that love and know that grace are motivated to the same kind of compassion, hope, and love for all creation. As we are linked in Jesus Christ to God, so we begin to share his love for creation and bring into the service of that love all of our gifts and talents and desires.

In Gospel of Luke we are told that “the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power they had seen, saying ‘Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!’ And Jesus said, ‘I tell you, if these [disciples] were silent, the stones would shout out.’” (Luke 19) For God so loved the world. I love Jesus and I want to follow him by loving the world and serving others. I want that to be said of me. Amen.