

*Based on Luke 22:35-23:45. The Passion of Jesus.*

A Spirit of Sackcloth Solidarity is with you! (And also with you!)

Throughout the Season of Lent, we at Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church have been grounding ourselves in spiritual practices in preparation for the moment we remember this day: a sham trial, a gleeful shaming, a public execution designed to squelch a movement of nonviolent radical love in the face of tyrannical power.

Our grounding in spiritual formation began on Ash Wednesday, as we clothed ourselves in the biblical tradition of sackcloth and ashes: a visible sign of deep sorrow and mourning, a re-aligning of our actions with our values, and a public witness to the injustice of our time.

Our grounding in spiritual formation continued through our Lenten exploration of the practices of fasting and prayer, simplicity and almsgiving, humility and conviction.

Our grounding in spiritual formation reached its crescendo on Palm Sunday though a slow procession of celebration and lament, song and silence, Hosanna! and heartbreak.

Our grounding in spiritual formation concluded last night, as we joined Jesus in his version of the Passover meal, made known to us as the Sacrament of Communion. Our liturgy framed the commandment to *love one another* as a basin of blessing within unspeakable betrayal, and as a practice of prayer for ourselves, for one another, and even for that very one we might call *enemy*.

It is a fraught thing to speak of *enemy*. We do it gingerly, with humility, with a confession that we, too, are *enemy* to another. But speak of *enemy* we must, as a gleeful cruelty in destroying others for the sake of ideology unfolds all around us, most recently in a refusal to facilitate release for a man wrongfully deported to the world's worst torture chamber, and our own United States Congressional Representative's shameless promotion of that evil.

Today we confront that enemy, unleashed in its original fullness on January 6, 2021:

A crowd worked into a frenzy to *stop a steal* that was never actually stolen. A gallows for a cross bar to hang *the faithful heretic*. A *desolating sacrilege* profaning the heart of the nation's hallowed halls. A horror unfolding with little that loving people could do, it seemed, to stop it.

In the years that followed, the enemy went underground, in apparent defeat. Perpetrators were held responsible, although not the instigator. Today, the enemy has struck back, going so far as to pardon the convicted insurrectionists, our modern day Barabbas. Condemning instead the faithful civil servant, the poor student who

relies on federally funded teachers and counselors, the trans youth whose very breath has become an act of defiance.

Like the women who follow Jesus to his death, we beat our breasts and wail.

Like Simon of Cyrene, compelled to carry the cross, we pray for the courage to hold the burden of those most harmed, even for a little while. To lessen their pain, if only for a brief moment, as the horror continues to unfold. We pray for the courage to ACT.

We look to the heroes of January 6 for strength in our task: the Capitol Police Department. Compelled against their will to stand for us all. In mortal combat, the equivalent of two swords against a mighty Roman Legion. Relying on their wits, on their shared bond, on a power greater than themselves that swooped in to side with them. And they prevailed.

But not without cost. Six police officers died from injuries from January 6, 2021. Four of them by suicide. Those who survived still carry the wounds. A *Good Friday* if I ever heard of one.

Which brings us to today. Called by none other than the mild-mannered self-described Reagan conservative, David Brooks, to a nonviolent massive civic uprising among universities, law, business, nonprofits and the scientific community, and civil servants. I would add The Church. And the sangha, and the synagogue, and the mosque, and the ashram, and the Quaker meeting, and the spiritual but not religious, and the *none* and the *done*, motivated by love and the grounding in spiritual discipline that such a movement will require.

Because it will cost us. It has already cost us.

It has cost us our sanity, as we consume just enough news to know what is happening but not so much that it renders us paralyzed. It has cost us our economy, as fairly stable jobs in civil service and education dry up with the whim of an algorithm. It has cost us our standing in the world, as immigrants and tourists alike say *no thank you* to the American Nightmare. It has cost us spiritual and emotional exhaustion on the edge of burnout. It has cost us our idolatry, believing *it can't happen here*, even as Native and Black America have insisted it all along that it already has.

When Jesus says *take up your cross and follow*, this is what he means. And more. He means staying through betrayal, kneeling with tool and basin, and walking—not away, but toward the horror of the moment. *And facing it!*

When Jesus says *take up your cross and follow* he means preparing—not with weapons but with wakefulness. Not with armor, but with sackcloth and solidarity. Not with swords, but with a love that will not yield.

In the meantime, as we prepare, for those who suffer most in the face of this evil, darkness has come over the whole land. From noon until three in the afternoon. The sun's light is failing. The curtain of the temple is tearing in two. Jesus, is crucified with the criminals, one on his right, and one on his left.

Our *Words to the Cross* come from my poet friend Thomas DeFreitas:

The bad thief, so called. He was right to ask:  
Can you not save us from this crucifixion?  
A Christ who bids us pray "Thy will be done  
on earth"; can he be passive at this outrage,  
this blatant and inhuman degradation?  
Can Justice sit still with laws manhandled,  
with freedoms violated, human bodies  
stripped and tortured, beaten and disappeared?  
Can you not heed the anguish of the trampled,  
the wailing of all mothers child-bereft,  
of spouses sundered by imperial guards,  
of Jeremiah's cry against the wicked  
who prosper while the holiest go starving?  
Jesus, come down: rescue your vanquished people.

[The Threshold Singers offer their musical gifts]

The cross is not the end. But it is a truth we must pass through.

Our Easter promise awaits. A crucified God is a horror to the hurting, it is a foolishness to the power of tyranny, it is a scandal to the devout, and yet—*A crucified God holds the power and the wisdom of Divine Love laid bare.*

Our crucified Love, in Sackcloth Solidarity, is not held by nails, but by the gravity of grace. Our crucified Love, in Sackcloth Solidarity, teaches us to tremble, and to keep showing up, trusting in the resurrecting power of a community that will not be silenced, even when—especially when—the sun refuses to shine.

[Choir Sings What Wondrous Love]