

All Saints Steenrijk Episcopal Church

Chapel of the Resurrection

Willemstad, Curacao

The Sunday of the Passion:

Palm Sunday (A)

April 2, 2023

A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish

“Earthquake, wind, and the small voice”

DRAFT

The Gospel: Matthew 27:1-54

When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people conferred together against Jesus in order to bring about his death. They bound him, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate the governor. When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. He said, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." But they said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself. But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, "It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since they are blood money." After conferring together, they used them to buy the potter's field as a place to bury foreigners. For this reason that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one on whom a price had been set, on

whom some of the people of Israel had set a price, and they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord commanded me." Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You say so." But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?" But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed. Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him." Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." Pilate said to them, "Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" All of them said, "Let him be crucified!" Then he asked, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!" So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." Then the people as a whole answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified. Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him. As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross. And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; then they sat down there and kept watch over him. Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of

the Jews." Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, 'I am God's Son.'" The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way. From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah." At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

Lord, the light of your life is shining.

May we follow it to find ourselves one day
in your eternal presence. Amen.

Recently I reread my sermon preached on Palm Sunday after the World Trade Centers fell in 2001. It was a time of internal violence in the United States never before observed since the Civil War. The weight of the two buildings was comparable to the weight of the whole Temple Mount in Jerusalem before 64 AD, and although the earthquake of the 9-11 fall was measured at 2.8, it was not even noticed. But when Christ died on the cross, the never before seen inner sanctum of the great Temple was ripped open in public view for the first time in history, and the earthquake was so tremendous that graves opened, and the once

dead saints came out. Yet in the Old Testament, the prophet Elijah was told by God not to find God in the earthquake, or wind, but in the 'mother of a voice', the 'yom qol', a sound that is only hearable in one's spirit. The noise of today's world tries to drown out that voice, the voice of God, to the detriment of us all. May we in this Holy Season observed by all three Abrahamic religions, seek to hear God's voice once again. There we will find true life.

Father Mychal Judge died on September 11, 2001, as he was giving the Last Rites to someone who had died there at the World

Trade Center following the first plane crash. Father Mychal was the long time Chaplain of the New York Fire Department. In a poignant snap shot taken shortly after his death, three firemen and another man are seen mournfully carrying the lifeless body of Father Mychal out of the building and heading for St. Peter's Church between at the corner of Church Street a couple of blocks away from the two towers. The scene readily recalls the beauty of the Pieta at the Vatican, with the mother of Christ cradling her son's dead body. They laid Father Mychal's body on the altar of St. Peter's Church where it remained through

the further traumas of that fateful day. Less than thirty minutes later, Building Two would fall, and soon after, Building One. The events of September 11 were perhaps the closest one might imagine to the day Jesus died on the cross on Golgotha. The buildings hit the earth with such force, each weighing a billion tons. The force of the earth's movement was so severe that the foundation of the sixty floor NASDAQ Building across the street from Building Two was actually shifted in such a way that the huge black six hundred foot tall building now still stands tilted four degrees off true vertical. An engineer from the Army Corps

of Engineer told me and another Chaplain at Ground Zero that the NASDAQ building however was still usable as long as the shift was less than seven and a half degrees. Can you imagine that? A shift of seven and half degrees would cause the elevator shafts to function improperly and elevator service would not be possible. But a four degree shift only means that statistically one's pencils would tend to roll off one's desk in the same direction every now and then.

In like manner, the earth quaked just after Jesus died on the cross. And in his sermon of more than a century ago on April 1, 1888, the great British evangelical preacher

Charles Spurgeon noted that this earthquake was the second miracle of Jesus' death. The first miracle was that the Temple's inner sanctum was revealed for the first time to the public by the wind tearing its covering veil from top to bottom. Before only the High Priest of the temple was ever allowed to see inside this Holy of Holies of the most holy spot in all the earth.

On the south side of Building Two stood St. George's Greek Orthodox Church. It was the nearest church building to the World Trade Center and stood four stories high, about sixty feet tall. When Building Two collapsed on it, St. George's was crushed

down to a mere two feet in height. Can you imagine that, from sixty feet to two feet? Even the church's strong iron safe was reduced to dust and never found. No wonder we found mostly only small human parts when the rubble was excavated. That crushing force would be equivalent to reducing a six-foot tall person to only about two inches high. A billion tons is just not even imaginable, but that was the weight of each 110-story building, a billion tons each. Each floor was a full acre in area. And the total floor area of the two towers was just over a third of a square mile, the approximate size of the Temple Mount of

Jerusalem, and perhaps approximately the size of the Field of Blood cemetery purchased by the blood money of Judas, Jesus' betrayer. The word "acre" derives from the Greek word, "agros", meaning "field". A third of a mile in area would be a square field with each side the length of ten football fields. And for a height of such buildings as the World Trade Centers with ceilings of about ten feet tall or so, that is a huge amount of concrete! So it is understandable how the earthquakes on September 11 occurred.

But at a crucifixion on the eve of Passover in about the Year 27 there was an

earthquake that broke the boulders, “split the rocks” the text of Matthew’s gospel says.

An earthquake of that magnitude would probably be greater than that of September 11, which we some five miles away could not even detect. The only cracks that occurred there at Ground Zero were in a few places along the concrete barrier wall, the so-called “containment basin”. But the rocks below or around were not split as far as one can see. Yet the record of Matthew’s gospel indicates that such huge forces were involved on the day of Christ’s crucifixion that rocks were actually split, an enormous force greater than the power of two billion

ton buildings falling suddenly down. The earth's crust heaved and wavered in sympathy with the groans of its Creator God, Son of the Father, who was and is and ever shall be. He cried in a loud voice to his Father, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" from the words of our Psalm 22 for today. It was a cry of bereftment, surely what many felt on September 11 as the buildings tumbled toward them. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken ... us?"

We feel this same inner cry well up within us each time we attempt to raise the alarm at the steadily declining environment

of our world. We cry to the Presidents and Governors and are rebuffed. We cry to each other in sympathy, knowing that yet another child will be born with birth defects, some severe, some less noticeable until later in life. We cry knowing that another woman will develop breast cancer, perhaps deadly unless the metastatic lump is detected early, and sometimes even early is not enough; and another father will be found with brain cancer or prostate cancer. Our cries rise to the heavens, but we are seemingly not heard. We cry about the pollutants and toxins once released each and every day from the refineries just down the street from here.

But although our cries seemed to reach no further than the end of our collective breaths, by some miracle the refineries stopped, and the health of our atmosphere here in Curacao once again began to move toward breathable. Yet the tide of cancers and birth defects and asthma and heart disease that spawned from the refineries fumes, with one in every four people having some sort of breathing difficulties right here in our midst and maybe in our own congregation. It's not right. My God, my God, why have you forsaken ... us? Yet, for our ultimate health, the refineries closed.

In a display of both helplessness and political expediency the governor Pontius Pilate washes his hands of the mess, as do some of our own politicians. “What can we do,” they cry.

Two bandits will die with Jesus that day of his crucifixion. One finally realizes his only hope will be with Jesus in eternity. The other never sees the light.

The Morris County, New Jersey, prosecutor told us at a meeting many years ago that the drug lords of Colombia, South America, make such profits on their sales in high income areas that they are hire sophisticated market researchers to find out

how to target individual children in higher income homes. A marketing plan is individually tailored for each child of a high net-worth family to move them from addiction to pills and marijuana on up to cocaine and on up to highly purified heroin that does not require a needle injection but is sniffed through the nose it is so potent. And once hooked, the child is slowly weaned back to the lower potency heroin requiring needle injection. Have you asked your child if he or she is using drugs lately? The sales effort is unmercifully continuous to keep up the profits the drug dealers have found so characteristic of many parts of the world.

And they said of Christ, “He trusts in God; let God deliver him now.” Let God deliver us now from this drug scourge among our young and our old.

Charles Spurgeon, a nineteenth century British preacher, said the third miracle following Jesus’ crucifixion was that the tombs of the saints were opened, and those there who had (quote) “fallen asleep” were raised. Matthew’s gospel reports, (quote) “after his resurrection they [the saints] came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many.” Spurgeon says this is one of the most unusual verses in the whole Bible in his opinion. Jesus’ spirit

leaves his dead body immediately upon his death, and immediately gives new life to the dead bodies of the saints buried around that crucifixion area. I note that Jesus' spirit was not in his body when it was placed into the tomb; Matthew's gospel says of the time immediately after Jesus died, "After his resurrection." Christ had already resurrected right from the cross. His physical body was still visible hanging there on the cross. But his spiritual body had already achieved resurrection. I try to comfort those who have suffered the loss of a loved one by telling them that the body they see no longer houses the spirit that they loved so much. It

is not easy to realize that only a dead shell remains, but that is the reality. The life of the spirit has already gone on without any discontinuity. Jesus was already “not there” on the cross in the spiritual sense. His body would be placed in a tomb, but his spirit had already left the premises. And in three days his mortal body would somehow be joined with his spiritual body once again for a brief while in his post resurrection appearances. And the new combination of spirit and flesh would have miraculous qualities of both the physical--the risen Christ could eat, as well as qualities of the spiritual--the risen body could move instantaneously through locked

doors and across miles of distances. And somehow even the saints of old were also enlivened and reappeared for a while to many immediately as Jesus died. How their ultimate ascension to heaven occurred we are not told. But we can only imagine something like Christ's ascension to heaven could have occurred. If ascension could happen to the Old Testament Elijah, why not to them as well? Maybe they too were carried up to heaven on a whirlwind or on a cloud sometime later.

The final payoff of the whole miraculous event was that the centurion and those with him watching Jesus die would exclaim,

“Truly this man was God’s Son!” The earthquake and the manner of death was unlike any they had ever witnessed before. They had seen the behavior of the man who through the most excruciating pain never cursed God, never cursed his neighbor, never cursed even those who nailed him to that tree. And they likely became believers on the spot, we are never told for certain. Maybe you too will become a believer on the spot, on this spot, right where you are sitting or standing. Jesus died this horrible death for you so that you also will never have to worry again, and you will be safe forever or not, come what may. The

crushing blows of the World Trade Center surely snuffed the lives of many. But some were in no ultimate jeopardy; they were followers of Christ. It is not how we die that matters. It is whom we die with, in our heart, that counts. If we die in the bosom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, we will be forever safe in his presence, and with him the day we die we will be in Paradise. Our eternity will be in the presence of the loving Father in heaven who sent him just to prepare a ladder to heaven for us.

May we too find this eternal rest from our labors at our own end. And for the time of our continuing to live here on earth, I

would like to close with this prayer Father Mychal, the chaplain martyr at 9-11 prayed each day:

“Lord, take me where you want me to go;
Let me meet who you want me to meet;
Tell me what you want me to say,
And keep me out of your way.” Amen.

“Earthquake, wind, and the small voice”

Description: In the Old Testament, the prophet Elijah was told by God not to find God in the earthquake, or the wind, but in the mother of a voice, the 'yom qol', a sound that is only hearable in one's spirit. The noise of today's world tries to drown out that voice, to the detriment of us all. May we in this Holy Season observed by all three Abrahamic religions, seek to hear God's voice once again.

Keys: Resurrection, crucifixion, criminals,
Jesus, God, Elijah, Abrahamic, earthquake,
9-11, saints