

“GOOD FRIDAY”
A Sermon Preached at
FIRST UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
Collinsville, IL
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(transcribed from audio file)

Psalm 22

*My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? why art thou so far
from helping me, and from the words of my roaring?
O my God, I cry in the day time, but thou hearest not; and in the night
season, and am not silent.
But thou art holy, O thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel.
Our fathers trusted in thee: they trusted, and thou didst deliver them.
They cried unto thee, and were delivered: they trusted in thee, and
were not confounded.
But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the
people.
All they that see me laugh me to scorn: they shoot out the lip, they
shake the head, saying,
He trusted on the LORD that he would deliver him: let him deliver him,
seeing he delighted in him.
But thou art he that took me out of the womb: thou didst make me
hope when I was upon my mother's breasts.
I was cast upon thee from the womb: thou art my God from my
mother's belly.
Be not far from me; for trouble is near; for there is none to help.
Many bulls have compassed me: strong bulls of Bashan have beset me
round.
They gaped upon me with their mouths, as a ravening and a roaring
lion.
I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint: my heart
is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels.
My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and my tongue cleaveth to my
jaws; and thou hast brought me into the dust of death.
For dogs have compassed me: the assembly of the wicked have
inclosed me: they pierced my hands and my feet.
I may tell all my bones: they look and stare upon me.*

*They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture.
 But be not thou far from me, O LORD: O my strength, haste thee to help me.
 Deliver my soul from the sword; my darling from the power of the dog.
 Save me from the lion's mouth: for thou hast heard me from the horns of the unicorns.
 I will declare thy name unto my brethren: in the midst of the congregation will I praise thee.
 Ye that fear the LORD, praise him; all ye the seed of Jacob, glorify him; and fear him, all ye the seed of Israel.
 For he hath not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; neither hath he hid his face from him; but when he cried unto him, he heard.
 My praise shall be of thee in the great congregation: I will pay my vows before them that fear him.
 The meek shall eat and be satisfied: they shall praise the LORD that seek him: your heart shall live for ever.
 All the ends of the world shall remember and turn unto the LORD: and all the kindreds of the nations shall worship before thee.
 For the kingdom is the LORD's: and he is the governor among the nations.
 All they that be fat upon earth shall eat and worship: all they that go down to the dust shall bow before him: and none can keep alive his own soul.
 A seed shall serve him; it shall be accounted to the Lord for a generation.
 They shall come, and shall declare his righteousness unto a people that shall be born, that he hath done this.* *NRSV*

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

It is often the tradition on Good Friday to read the full story of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion which is John 18 & 19. And so this evening I would like to share that with you in the form of this dramatic retelling of those events.

Gather around friends and listen close. Let me take you back to that fateful night after Jesus had shared his last words with his closest friends. He led them out across the Kidron Valley. You know the place. It's a garden. A quiet spot he often went to pray. He and his disciples went in seeking perhaps a moment's peace under the olive

trees. But peace wasn't to be found that night because someone else knew that garden. Judas. The one who would betray him and soon the quiet was shattered as in the flickering torch light cutting through the darkness, the clatter of weapons.

Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the Chief Priests and the Pharisees and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons.

Now Jesus knew everything that was coming. He didn't hide. He stepped forward into the light and asked them plain and simple, "Who is it you are looking for?"

They answered back, "Jesus of Nazareth".

And Jesus said, "I am he." Just those words.

Something happened, friends. Those armed men, they drew back. Stumbled. Fell right there on the ground. The power of his presence. So, he asked them again, calm as ever. "Who are you looking for?"

"Jesus of Nazareth" they said again.

"I told you" Jesus replied. "I am he, so if you're looking for me, let these others go." Even then, protecting his own, making sure not one was lost.

But you know Peter, impulsive Peter. In a flash he pulled out a sword and swung wildly, cutting off the ear of the High Priest servant, Malchus. But Jesus stopped him right there. "Peter" he said. "Put that sword away. Don't you think I should drink the cup the father has given me?"

And with that the moment passed. The soldiers grabbed Jesus. Bound his hands tight. The master was arrested. They dragged him off first to Annas and then straight to Caiaphas, the High Priest, the very one who had already decided it was best for one man to die for all the people.

Now Peter, bless his heart, followed at a distance along with another disciple who knew folks in the High Priest house. This other disciple got in easily, but Peter was stuck outside the gate. Out in the cold night. Fear starting to creep into his heart.

Eventually the other disciples spoke to the woman at the gate and brought Peter into the courtyard. There were guards there warming themselves by a charcoal fire. Peter went over, trying to blend in, but the servant girl, she looked right at him.

“You’re not one of this man’s disciples, too, are you?” she asked.

And Peter, shivering, maybe from cold and maybe from fear said “No. I’m not.”

Meanwhile inside, Jesus stood before the High Priest, facing questions about his followers, his teachings, and Jesus answered boldly. “I’ve spoken openly to everyone. I taught in the synagogues and it’s simple. I said nothing secret. Why ask me? Ask the people who heard me. They know what I said.”

For saying that one of the guards standing nearby struck him hard across the face. “Is that how you answer the High Priest?”

Jesus even then, so composed said, “If I said something wrong, tell me. Tell me what it was. But if I spoke the truth, why did you hit me?”

After that Annas sent him on, still bound, to Caiaphas.

Peter? He was still outside trying to stay warm by that fire. Someone else pointed at him. “You are definitely one of his disciples.”

“I am not” he insisted, denying him again.

Then another man, a relative of Malchus, the one whose ear Peter had cut off. He looked closer. “Wait a minute. Didn’t I see you out in the garden with him?”

Peter denied it one last time. Right at that moment, piercing the cold dawn air, a rooster crowed. Peter remembered Jesus’ words that he would betray him three times and his heart broke.

As the sun began to rise, they hauled Jesus away again. This time to the headquarters of Pilate, the Roman governor. The Jewish leaders though, they wouldn’t go inside. Oh no. They didn’t want to risk becoming ritually unclean before the Passover feast.

So, Pilate had to come out to them. “All right! What’s the accusation against this man?”

They were evasive. “If he wasn’t a criminal, we wouldn’t have brought him to you.”

Pilate sighed, already tired of it. “Fine. Take him yourselves. Judge him by your own law.”

“But we can’t execute anyone” they shout back and just like that they fulfilled what Jesus himself had said about how he would die.

So, Pilate went back inside. Called for Jesus. “Tell me” he asked. Maybe curious. Maybe a little worried. “Are you the King of the Jews?”

Jesus looked at him. “Is that your question, Pilate, or did others tell you about me?”

Pilate scoffed. “Am I a Jew? Your own people, your Chief Priest, they handed you over. What have you done?”

Jesus explained. “My kingdom, it’s not like the kingdoms of this world. If it were, my followers would be fighting right now to keep me from being arrested. But my kingdom, it’s from somewhere else.”

“Ahh” Pilate said, leaning in. “So you are a king then.”

Jesus replied “You’re the one calling me a king, but yes for this reason I was born. For this I came into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth, listens to my voice.”

Pilate, maybe cynical, maybe searching, asked that famous question. “What is truth?”

He went back out to the crowd. “Look, I find no basis for the charge against him.” He tried to give them an out, you see. “You have this custom, right? I release one prisoner at Passover. How about I release this King of the Jews?”

But the crowd, stirred up by the priest roared back, “No! Not him! Give us Barabbas!”

Barabbas, friends was a rebel, a violent man. That’s who they chose. Pilate frustrated now, maybe even angry, took Jesus and had him flogged. Imagine the brutality. Then the soldiers, they twisted thorny branches into a mockery of a crown and they jammed it down on his head. They threw a purple robe on his bleeding back, laughed and spat on him, jeering “Hail, King of the Jews.”

Pilate brought him out again, this broken, bleeding figure. “Behold the man” he cried, maybe hoping for pity from the crowd, but the sight just fueled their rage.

“Crucify him! Crucify him!” Screamed like animals.

But Pilate still hesitated, saying he found no fault. They played their trump card. “We have a law and by that law he must die because he claimed to be the Son of God.”

Now Pilate was truly afraid. He took Jesus back inside. “Where do you come from?” he pleaded, but Jesus gave him no answer. “You don’t speak to me? Don’t you realize I have the power to release you or to crucify you?”

Jesus answered him calmly. “You have no power over me at all unless it had been given to you from above.”

Pilate tried again to release him but the crowd outside was relentless. “If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.”

That did it. Politics won. Pilate brought Jesus outside one last time. He sat down on the judge’s seat at the place called the stone pavement (Gabbatha in Hebrew). It was about noon the day that they prepared for Passover.

“Here is your king” Pilate declared, maybe with sarcasm, maybe despair, but they just shrieked, “Away with him! Crucify him!”

“Shall I crucify your king?” Pilate asked one last time.

And the Chief Priest gave that chilling answer. “We have no king, but Caesar.”

Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified. They took Jesus. They forced him to carry his own cross, stumbling through the streets towards the hill called Golgotha, the place of the Skull and there they nailed him to the wood. One criminal to his right. One to his left. Jesus there in the middle.

Pilate had a sign written. Jesus of Nazareth. The King of the Jews and put it up on the cross in three languages. The Chief Priest protested. “Don’t write King of the Jews. Write, this man claimed to be king.”

But Pilate, weary of it all just said, “What I have written, I have written.”

Down below the soldiers gambled, casting lots for his tunic. The one woven seamlessly from top to bottom just like the scriptures said. But standing near the cross watching in agony were a few brave souls, his mother, Mary, her sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene, and the disciple Jesus loved.

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple standing there, he looked at her and said, “Woman, here is your son.” Then to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” A final act of care.

He knew the end was near. To fulfill one last scripture, he whispered “I. Am. Thirsty.”

Someone lifted a sponge soaked in sour wine on it, a branch, lifted to his lips. When he received it, he breathed his final words, “It. Is. Finished” and bowed his head. He gave up his Spirit.

Because the Sabbath was coming, a High Holy Day, the leaders asked Pilate to hurry things up so the soldiers came and broke the legs of the other two criminals crucified with him, but when they came to Jesus, they saw that he was already dead, so they didn’t break his legs. Another prophecy fulfilled. Instead one soldier took a spear and pierced Jesus’ side, and immediately blood and water flowed out. Sign. Testament.

As evening fell, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected counsel member, but a secret follower of Jesus, who was afraid, got up his courage. He went to Pilate and asked for the body. Pilate agreed. Then Nicodemus came too. Maybe you remember him from when he had his encounter with Jesus. The one who came to Jesus by night? He brought a huge amount of costly spices and myrrh and aloes. Together these two men acting boldly now, took the body of Jesus. They wrapped it gently in linen cloth with all those spices, according to their burial customs.

There was a garden near the crucifixion site and in it a brand-new tomb, never used before. Because the Sabbath was starting and the tomb was close by, they laid Jesus there and they rolled a stone across the entrance as the Sabbath descended.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

It is better to die on my feet than live on my knees. That's a famous quote attributed to Constantine, Zapata and a few other people. No one on the internet seems to know for sure where this theme originally came from. It is better to die on my feet than live on my knees.

It feels fitting for tonight, a night where we read the story of the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus. A night in the year 2025. A night to ask ourselves, what do we stand for and what do we stand against? Because when they came to arrest Jesus, he courageously stood for something, and he stood against something.

Courageously, because when they came for Jesus, it wasn't just a handful of soldiers. Verse 3 tells us that Judas brought a "detachment of soldiers". The Greek word that is translated as detachment means three different things and bear with me. It's math.

It could mean a $1/10^{\text{th}}$ of a legion and a legion is 5,000 to 6,000 men. So, $1/10^{\text{th}}$ of that would be 500 to 600 men.

The Greek word could also mean military auxiliary which would be either 500 or 1,000 men.

Or, it could mean manifold or a 30^{th} of a legion which would be around 183 men.

So, even if we take the smallest number, the smallest number, that's still 183 soldiers. 183 men that came to arrest Jesus plus the police from the Chief Priests and the Pharisees. All with lanterns and torches and weapons. So, let's just call it 200. 200 men came to arrest Jesus that night a long time ago. Can you imagine 200 people, 200 police coming to arrest you? Don't you think 3 to 5 would be intimidating enough? But no, they thought 200 men would be needed which is a testament to Jesus' power and authority but also let's just call it what it is – incredibly intimidating and perhaps even terrifying.

So, in light of that reality, the next verse is even more moving. When Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him came forward and asked them, "Whom are you looking for?"

They answered, "Jesus of Nazareth" and Jesus replied "I am he" to the 200.

Jesus doesn't kneel. Jesus doesn't run. Jesus doesn't bend. Jesus doesn't say, "I don't know who that is" or "I didn't mean what I've been saying all these years of my teaching."

Jesus simply responds to the 200 who came for him, “I am he”.

Jesus knew it would be hard. Jesus knew what would happen and he still stood courageously for truth, for what he had come on earth to do, that we might know how to truly follow God and love one another. Jesus stood up for us to the point of death on a cross.

Jesus stood against government and religious institutions that were working together. A problematic mix at best and a deadly mix at worst, as it was for Christ.

As followers of Jesus Christ in 2025 I think today we have to ask ourselves, what do we stand for? Well, if we truly are Christians, Christ’s followers that means that we stand for our neighbors but also to marginalize the oppressed, the poor, the immigrants because Jesus stood on his feet against 200, knowing that he would end up dying so that we might know the love of God and that it trumped historical and religious power structures. It trumps anger. It trumps the sins of this world.

So, the second question to ask ourselves tonight, what do we stand against? People and institutions that would place profit and power over loving our neighbors, over caring for the poor and widows, over the place of the immigrant.

Tonight is the night where we heard the story of the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus. It is a night in the year of 2025, and it is a night to ask ourselves as followers of our God who died on his feet, what do we stand for and what do we stand against?

Jesus showed us and now we have to decide if we will courageously follow his example.

Amen? Amen.