

Title: “The Stillness of Compassion”

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Epistle: 1 Peter 1:18-25
Gospel: Mark 15:1-15

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Overview:

Jesus made no reply and Pilate was amazed. In this very moment Jesus remained silent. He could have called his army of angels, he could have saved himself, but he didn't. In the stillness of His silence, he showed compassion.

Lesson:

Turn away from all of the Christmas distractions and focus your eyes on the cross. What do you see? The body is removed, the blood washed away and what remains is a stillness: a stillness of peace, and calm, and love. What remains is God's compassion. And if you look down to its base you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Do you remember, back in the olden days, when you could tell Christmas was just around the corner by a change in the weather, not a temperature change but something different? Do you remember that the air would become thick with anticipation and excitement and everything had a certain joyful ring to it? Do you remember when you knew it was very close because radio stations started playing carols, the stores started selling decorations, and the television commercials started pushing toys? Today, it seems, all that means is Labor Day just finished. I've been in stores that were selling Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas decorations at the same time. I've heard of radio stations playing Christmas music immediately after the trick-or-treating ends. Times have changed over these long years, but not everything has changed with it. We still see the busyness of Christmas all around. We see stores full of shoppers, calendars stuffed more than a Christmas turkey, and scarcely any free time to really enjoy the season.

Some of this is unavoidable, and if you don't believe me, just sit a child down and explain to them that you and Santa will not be shopping for her this year because you want more time to relax and enjoy Christmas! Or, tell your extended family that you are unwilling to celebrate with them because you want a month for reflection. Neither of those will end well, I promise you. But some things are avoidable. Maybe you don't really have to respond affirmatively to every invitation you receive, or maybe you don't have to buy a gift for every single person in your address book. Or, maybe the first times you block out on your calendar are those that are reserved for devotional time with God. You probably recall hearing this suggestion a year ago and I'm guessing that you might not have thought about it since. That, you see, is one reason for Advent. It is a time to remind ourselves to breathe, to be still and breathe. Remove from your mind the task list that is ever changing and set aside the stress that the season may be causing you. Discard any guilt you have about not spending enough time in conversation with God, and just breathe. And in your stillness, turn away from all of those distractions and focus your eyes on the cross. What do you see? The body is removed, the blood washed away and all that remains is a stillness: a stillness of peace, and calm, and love. What remains is

God's compassion. And if you look down to its base you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

This is Advent and over the next three weeks we will lean into the stillness of the cross through several unexpected passages. We will recount the suffering and death of Christ but through the lens of Christmas and the infant Jesus. We will journey to the manger but at the same time also find ourselves journeying to the cross. For although we may want to travel to Bethlehem, it is Golgotha where we should be destined.

Tonight, we read of the conversation between Pilate and Jesus. Starting in verse 2:

²And Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" And he answered him, "You have said so." ³And the chief priests accused him of many things. ⁴And Pilate again asked him, "Have you no answer to make? See how many charges they bring against you." ⁵But Jesus made no further answer, so that Pilate was amazed.

Jesus made no reply and Pilate was amazed. Can you picture this? Even before the morning sun, the air was thick with anticipation, stress, and activity. There was movement everywhere, from everyone. The chief priests were seeking testimony from anyone who might know Jesus, the witnesses were entering and exiting the courtyard, the scribes were busy recording the proceedings, the elders were consulting with the priests, and all, including the guards were spitting on Him and striking him and yelling "Prophecy!" And as the sun rose this activity didn't set, but instead just moved to Pilate. And there the chief priests accused Jesus and Pilate joined in demanding a response from Him. And in all this commotion Jesus remained silent. At this moment he could have called his army of angels who would have descended to Earth and destroyed the Roman army and freed the captive. Not a soldier would be left alive, not one. At this moment Jesus could have saved himself. He could have walked right out of that residence or could have ascended up to heaven. At that moment Jesus could have done anything He wanted, and He did: he remained still, and he remained silent.

You see, in the stillness of his silence, he showed them compassion. He showed them, and us, and the entire world that he came to save, not to destroy; that he came to seek, not to scatter. Through the stillness of his compassion he would ransom us **"from the futile ways inherited from [our] forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, ¹⁹but with the precious blood of Christ,"** as we read in the Epistle passage. He would gather us to him and lead us to his cross.

And at the foot of the cross, where we find freedom, we also find the baby Jesus. And although he can't speak, and although he can't walk, he can love, and he can save. And it is there, in the manger that he calls us to him, but not to look down towards the bed but to look up towards the cross and to see the compassion that engulfs it. This is where we are headed, and Christmas is but the first step in the journey. And so, tonight, I encourage you to be still and contemplate the compassion of the cross.

Let's pray.

Lord in the chaos of our lives, especially in this time before Christmas, we take a moment and breathe. We know that soon we will leave this church and reintroduce ourselves to the busyness of our calendars and checklists, but tonight we set all of that aside and turn to you. In the stillness of this very moment, we look upon the cross and remind ourselves of the compassion that you have for each of us. Amen.

And at this time, I invite you to take a few moments in silence and reflect where you need his compassion in your life right now. Where do you need to experience his gentleness, his mercy, and his grace? Tonight, he is with you, right here, right now, and the shadow of his cross falls upon you in love. Let it wrap your pains, your sins, your needs, in his compassionate peace.