

**The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush**  
**East Liberty Presbyterian Church**  
**April 1, 2012, Passion Sunday (Palm Sunday)**  
***Worship service in special format***  
**Matthew 27:26-50**

One of the hardest questions of faith involves asking about “the problem of evil.” Why does evil exist? How can evil exist in a world overseen by a loving God? Lots of people struggle with these questions.

The two most common answers are these: 1) Evil comes from wrong choices we freely make. Our free will can lead to painful and tragic consequences. 2) Evil things happen as a warning or as a way to teach us lessons that we need to learn. Both those answers are flawed, yet both of them contain a kernel of truth.

First: The choices we make may be well-intended and may do good things; but we also sin and we never see the full range of consequences resulting from the decisions we make. Though we mean to do well, some of today’s choices lay a foundation for grief and suffering tomorrow. Multiply this dynamic by millions upon millions of freely-acting human beings, acting over centuries of time, and you have a recipe for a world deeply tangled in both goodness and evil.

Second: No matter how terrible the evil may be, there is always the possibility to learn something from it. That doesn’t excuse the evil or tragedy, but it is a dynamic that cannot be absolutely denied. A recent article I read spoke about soldiers returning back from the Iraq-Afghanistan war, wounded and struggling with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), but who also acknowledged that their experiences led them to a time of personal growth; and, truthfully, a level of commitment and hopefulness in their lives that would have been impossible had they not endured all they had gone through. This condition even has a name; it’s called “post-traumatic growth.”

This is difficult terrain to discuss in a sermon. Evil is painful and bad, and cannot be dismissed as being necessary for us to grow. However, there are always things at work that are bigger and stronger than the evil itself. There are ways that goodness can emerge out of the ashes of pain and loss and suffering.

This is why we re-tell the story of Christ’s death. To learn anything about the deep questions of life requires that we look deeply at life. In this case, look deeply at this Son of God, this healer and blessing and savior who endured the worst that life can inflict on him or anyone. We remember Christ’s story, because only through that remembrance can we, too, move to that place that sees a horizon of hope beyond the foreground of despair. Only through knowing Christ’s story can we faithfully speak words about resurrection in a world of crucifixion and death and tragedy. So listen again to this story, for it is our story as well.



*(Note to reader: The following readings were read aloud during the service.)*

Reading from the book of Matthew, chapter 27, Rev. Bush reads:

11 Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus said, “You say so.” 12 But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. 13 Then Pilate said to him, “Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?” 14 But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed. 15 Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. 16 At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. 17 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?” 18 For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over.

Rev. Schoenewolf continues:

19 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.”

Rev. Fowler-Searcy continues:

20 Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. 21 The governor again said to them, “Which of the two do you want me to release for you?” And they said, “Barabbas.” 22 Pilate said to them, “Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?” All of them said, “Let him be crucified!” 23 Then he asked, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Let him be crucified!”

Rev. Bush continues:

24 [Randy] 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.”



Rev. Schoenewolf continues:

26 Pilate released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified. 27 Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. 28 They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, 29 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!" 30 They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. 31 After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

Rev. Fowler-Searcy continues:

32 [Patrice] As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross. 33 And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), 34 they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. 35 And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; 36 then they sat down there and kept watch over him. 37 Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."

Rev. Bush continues:

38 Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. 39 Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads 40 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."

Rev. Schoenewolf continues:

41 [Heather] In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, 42 "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. 43 He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, 'I am God's Son.'"

Rev. Fowler-Searcy continues:

44 The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.

Rev. Bush continues:

45 From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. 46 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?"

Rev. Fowler-Searcy continues:



47 When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, “This man is calling for Elijah.” 48 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.

Rev. Schoenewolf continues:

49 But the others said, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.”

Rev. Bush continues:

50 Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.

