

“Passion and Vindication”

Reading: John 13:1-17; 19:16-39

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Most of us, I hope, know the satisfaction that comes at the end of a day of good, productive work. Believe it or not, even I as a pastor, with all the jokes I’ve heard about how pastors only work one day a week, even I have, on occasion, worked a hard day’s work. There is the work of toil, which is not usually satisfying, and there is the work of building or creating or contributing, when we hit the pillow with tired brains or tired muscles that have been spent in something worthwhile. That’s probably not every day for very many of us, but hopefully you have those days from time to time.

I make sure to distinguish between toil and work, because work is a good thing that we are created for and that fulfills our calling as humans, while toil is a result of the fall. As tiring as it can be, good work is life-giving, regardless of whether you get paid for it. Toil, on the other hand, is life-destroying, even though toil sometimes is what pays our bills and puts food on our tables. There is work that must be done, and there is work that is worth doing. There is work from which we see little or no gain or purpose or meaning, and there is work that bears fruit.

Some people have an easier time than others at remembering this truth about work. Some of you enjoy good work so much that you can’t imagine sitting around doing nothing, but a lot of people need the reminder that not all sacrifice, investment, work, struggle is a bad thing. In fact, many of the best things in life — perhaps not the most fun things or the most pleasurable things, but the *best* things — come only through struggle. It’s a truth of human life that is a glimpse or a remnant of one of the key truths about God’s kingdom: first comes passion, struggle, suffering, sacrifice, and then comes vindication, glorification, resurrection, blessing at the hands of God.

We have now been journeying together through *The Story* for 26 weeks, and we have arrived at the unexpected crossroads of the entire journey. It’s perhaps not unexpected to us that Jesus was crucified, but I call it an unexpected crossroads because those who lived this story the first time apparently didn’t see it coming. They did not expect the story to come to this, and yet now we realize that this is one of its most important chapters. We know that everything has been leading up to this, and everything that comes after flows from it. Now we see that far from the cross of Christ being a surprising, unprecedented event, our story is in fact composed of a long line of crosses stretching through the ages, both before and after the life of Jesus. There is always that moment of the cross, that moment of decision, of confrontation with the reality of one’s life, when those who would be God’s people must choose whether to take the easy way or the hard way, knowing that the easy way means no cross but no glory, and the hard way leads to passion and then vindication.

I think of Abraham, the first in the long line of God’s people, who first had to leave his homeland behind before he could hear the promise of God. He first had to wait for decades before God blessed him with the gift of a son and heir through which nations would be built. He had to pass the test of willingness to give that son back to God before the promise was confirmed. No, Abraham was not crucified, but he faced the choice of the cross many times in smaller ways: the choice to trust in God’s faithfulness for his vindication.

Or Joseph, a few generations later, who suffers in the pit of prison for his righteous choices before he is exalted to Pharaoh's right-hand man. Or Moses, who spends decades in obscurity tending sheep before he encounters God at the burning bush, and who must then lead God's people through a generation of wandering before they are fit to enter the Promised Land. Or David, who is wrongly accused and pursued through the wilderness before he can become king. Or Jeremiah, who suffers persecution at the hands of corrupt kings as a result of his reluctant willingness to proclaim the words of God. Or Daniel and his friends in exile, who face blazing furnaces and dens of lions for their commitment to God. Or Esther, who risks her comfort and position and even her life to protect her people from genocide. Or Mary and Joseph, who risk their relationship and their reputation to give birth to the Messiah.

And then God Himself arrives in this man Jesus and confirms that yes, this is the way of His kingdom. Passion and then vindication. Suffering and then glory. The seed must die before it produces fruit. The bread is broken before it is blessed and multiplied. There must be the pains and danger of labor before giving birth. There is risk and investment before reward. Those who want to find their lives must first lose them. Suffering and death come before resurrection. Passion comes before vindication.

He tried to tell them this all along, but they had such a hard time hearing Him. And then, on the night He was betrayed, we listen in on two final lessons. First, He quite literally takes the position of a servant. The Lord strips off His outer clothes, kneels at the feet of His own students, and washes their feet. It's so absurd that Peter objects and outright refuses. But no, it's not absurd in this story, because it's how the story works: "Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them," He says. Wash one another's feet, and then you will be blessed. The other gospels recount His Last Supper, in which He takes the symbols of their familiar meal celebrating redemption and recasts it in new terms. Instead of a Passover lamb, their redemption comes through His body and blood, the bread and wine of this sacrificial meal. He gives Himself, and the sins of the world are taken away.

And then, of course, as the ultimate example, He chooses the cross. It's part of the story, the climactic chapter: John and the other gospel writers are careful to point out all the things Jesus does or says "so that the Scriptures might be fulfilled," tying this event back to the earlier chapters. He knows that His cross makes all those other crosses worthwhile, that His death and suffering will defeat death and suffering, so that those who live and die in Him will truly live and never truly die. He knows that His path to vindication, exaltation, glory, can only be found on the other side of this cross. This is the point of our story: to exalt Him, glorify Him, to put Him back on the throne He deserves to have over all of creation and all of our hearts.

And because this cross is a confrontation between two conflicting kingdoms, it forces everyone around it to choose their sides. They have to decide whether they'll take up their crosses and continue in the story. We see all sorts of folk on this battlefield. Some are self-righteous and mocking; they double down on their rejection of God and His kingdom. Some, like Peter and the other disciples, are confused and afraid. Some, like Pilate, might have some respect for Jesus but are too committed to their other kingdoms to think there's a place for them in God's kingdom. Some, like Jesus' mother, are broken and mourning. Some, like Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, are latecomers to the party; they weren't committed at first, but when they're confronted by the cross, they're willing to enter the story.

We are likewise faced with their decision today. Will we stand at the foot of the cross as those who know that first comes the passion, and then the vindication? Or will we reject the cross and its self-denial and suffering, and instead choose momentary comfort for lasting darkness? Today as we celebrate the Lord's Supper and remember His sacrifice, this act commits us to His path of taking up the cross, of living in such a way that loving others and honoring God takes precedence over our own glory and comfort.



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