

LENTEN SERIES 2019
SEVEN DAYS TO GLORY: Holy Week
First Presbyterian Church
Week 5—“The Silence of Saturday”

INTRODUCTION

In this Lenten Series, we will explore the particulars of each day during what we know as “Holy Week”—the seven days to Easter following Jesus’ Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem. The writer follows the chronology as recorded in Mark’s gospel.

This week we will explore Saturday ...

Saturday is a day of silence that stands in stark contrast to the week of shouting that has preceded it.

Scripture:

Isaiah 50:4-9

Mark 15:42-47

This week’s Mark passage picks up the narrative from Session 4’s “God’s Friday” lesson and deals mostly with the final events of *Good Friday*—the burial of Jesus. Mark’s gospel says nothing about Saturday—chapter 15 ends with Jesus’ burial just before the Sabbath begins (at 6pm) and chapter 16 begins on Easter morning.

SILENT SATURDAY

Similar to how scripture is strangely silent about Wednesday of Holy Week (we basically skipped from Tuesday to Thursday in our series), it is equally silent about the events of Saturday. Again, scripture just doesn’t really cover it.

- ✦ But, this time around, it’s not all that strange.
- ✦ You see, as of nightfall on Good Friday evening, all the Jewish people began observing the Sabbath day, and no one was allowed to do much of anything on the Sabbath.
- ✦ So it’s not at all surprising that Mark’s gospel, and most every gospel, says nothing about it.
 - Instead, each gospel moves on from the crucifixion and begins a new chapter with the events of Easter morning.
 - Whatever happened on Saturday happened silently—in contrast to the days of shouting that preceded it—and Saturday’s events are left largely up to our imagination.
 - It is very likely that Jesus’ closest friends and followers
 - were well hidden,
 - subdued by their sadness,
 - taking time to regroup and reassess their situation,
 - processing the shock and fear and grief they must have all felt after such a tumultuous sequence of events.

THE BURIAL OF JESUS

So left with no reported events from *Silent Saturday*, let us take the opportunity to consider the final event of Good Friday—the burial of Jesus:

- ✦ something that had to occur rather quickly that Good Friday afternoon
 - because for Jews, the burial of the dead was regarded as a sacred duty,
 - and it must be done on the day of death
 - in Jesus’ case, his death occurred on a Friday, making time of the essence—
 - burial had to occur before about 6pm when the Sabbath began at sundown
 - so as to avoid defiling the land according to the law of Moses as recorded in Deuteronomy.
- ✦ In addition, according to Jewish law and custom,
 - Jesus, as an executed criminal,
 - could not be buried in his family tomb
 - (if one even existed in Jerusalem since he was most recently a resident of Nazareth).
 - Instead of a tomb, he would have been buried in a simple vault set aside for criminals.
- ✦ However, because the Jewish Council, known as the *Sanhedrin*, delivered Jesus to the Roman authorities for execution, it was incumbent upon *them* to arrange for proper burial.
 - And, this task fell to a friend of Jesus,
 - a good and righteous man who served on the Council—
 - a man who was secretly a disciple of Jesus—
 - a man named Joseph of Arimathea.
 - And, it was Joseph who offered his own tomb in place of the vault normally used for a criminal.
 - Thus, Jesus was placed in the tomb on Friday afternoon before the Sabbath began at nightfall,
 - and the first opportunity for anyone to visit the tomb during daylight hours was on Easter Sunday morning—
 - because it was forbidden on the Sabbath (on *Silent Saturday*).

THE MEANING OF JESUS’ DEATH AND THE FULLNESS OF GOD’S GRACE

Though the gospels are silent about what happened on Saturday, we can draw upon clues found in other scriptures and our historic Christian creeds—hints of the **meaning of Jesus’ death** and the **fullness of God’s grace**:

Hint #1: “He Descended into Hell ...”

From the *Apostles’ Creed*, Christian tradition helps fill the gap about the activities of Jesus following his death on the cross:

- ✦ First, it is a misinterpretation of the creed’s ancient language to believe that Jesus literally “went to hell”
 - from the Jewish perspective, Jesus went to the place of the dead
 - not a hell of punishment
 - but the Hebrew *Sheol* or the Greek *Hades*
 - the place where all who died went
 - a shadowy semi-existence for those who lived in former times

- essentially, this phrase from the *Apostles Creed* affirms one component of the **meaning of Jesus death**:
 - that Jesus really died the same death that all mortal human beings experience
 - and he went to the place where all dead people go
- ✦ Secondly, Jesus' death was for the salvation of all people, even those who lived before the time of Jesus
 - 1st Peter 3:18-19: "For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison."
 - This image of Jesus preaching in the place of the dead (where spirits are imprisoned) is traditionally known as the "harrowing of hell"
 - The word "harrowing" is an old English word for "robbing"
 - Thus, Jesus went to the place of the dead to proclaim the good news of salvation to all who had died before him
 - To burst open the "gates of hell" (to burst open that which confined & imprisoned the dead)
 - To rob the place of the dead of its residents
 - To lead faithful people into eternal life
 - To truly reveal the **fullness of God's grace!**

Hint #2: The Sealing of the Tomb

From Matthew 27:62-66, we get the account of the intensely political story of securing Jesus' tomb:

- ✦ First, Pilate had a priority of maintaining law and order, especially as it related to matters of national security
 - With as many as 1.5 million pilgrims packed into Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover festival, the threat of an uprising was never greater
 - One act of defiance could set off a revolt
- ✦ Secondly, Caiaphas and the other chief priests still remembered Jesus' threat/promise that after three days he would rise again
 - The Jewish leaders didn't want the "Jesus problem" to return
 - They also feared that Jesus' followers might try to steal his corpse and falsely claim he had risen from the dead
- ✦ So they ask Pilate to secure the tomb—have it sealed and guarded
 - Sealing the tomb with a large stone rolled across its entrance
 - Probably also with the seal of the emperor stamped in wax
 - Would have meant that moving the stone would have been easily detected
 - Would have also made resurrection illegal in the eyes of the Romans (breaking the emperor's seal)
 - Pilate gives the order—take some soldiers and make the tomb as secure as possible
 - Matthew's gospel doesn't miss the irony of Pilate's words
 - How secure can you make the tomb with elements of this world?
 - How secure can a guard of soldiers make a tomb when God has other plans?

BACK TO THE SILENCE OF SATURDAY

Saturday of Holy Week is, above all else, a day for prayer, preparation, and silence.

Maybe we can identify with the silence of Saturday.

- ✦ For it is often in the silence that we learn and grow.
- ✦ In a world of noise and fury, it is often in the rare silences that God speaks the loudest.

The strange silence of Saturday may possibly

- ✦ connect with our own losses and times of grief throughout our lives—
- ✦ the gaps between our hopes and disappointments,
- ✦ between prayers and answers that don't seem to come easily.

The challenge for each of us is how to live in the “meantimes” of life—

- ✦ in the seasons of waiting,
- ✦ in the silent times.
 - Saturday's silence—the silence of Christ's tomb—
 - was full of meaning,
 - just as our own silent times are.

If nothing else, God is with us during our silent times, just as God was with Jesus' closest friends and followers during their own silent time following Jesus' death ...

- as they were well hidden,
- as they were subdued by their sadness,
- as they were taking time to regroup and reassess their situation,
- as they were processing the shock and fear and grief they must have all felt after such a tumultuous sequence of events.