

Text: Luke 18:31-34
Songs of the Passion Series

 1st Lent Midweek
Hymn: *Jesus, I Will Ponder Now*

Pondering the Passion

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: St. Augustine, one of the most influential fathers of the early Church, once said, “He who sings, prays twice.” What he was pointing to is the way that putting words to music causes the singer to reflect more deeply on the thoughts that he or she is expressing in those words. This is especially true when the mood and character of the music fits the message. That is to say a song with a snappy beat and a cheerful lilt lifts the spirit and reinforces lyrics that convey joy, while music that is dark and sober helps direct the soul to more thoroughly express sorrow or grief. In addition to this, singing has a more of a lasting effect on the mind because song lyrics tend to be more memorable than just words alone – which is what every pastor teaching confirmation learns: how it is that students can almost instantly learn the long and complicated lyrics to their latest favorite ditties, but they can’t seem to get to stick just a few lines of the Catechism. Of course, I suspect that motivation level and relative effort expended has something to do with it too. Still, I think that Augustine was on to something when he said, “He who sings, prays twice.”

That’s why for this year’s series of Lenten devotions we’ve chosen to take a close look at some of the classic hymns of the season. You see, in the forty days of Lent we are to be about the task of pondering the passion of our Lord. We are to be reviewing its actual facts and history as recorded for us in the Scriptures so that we know *what* happened; we should be inquiring into its meaning and its role in God’s plan of salvation so we know *why* it happened, and we should be exploring its continuing significance in our lives as believers in Jesus so that we can learn to trust him completely and understand what it means to take up our own crosses and follow him. We do this every year in our annual Lenten pilgrimage in order to better prepare our hearts and minds to experience first the deep distress of Passion Week and then the eruption of joy that follows at Easter when Christ our Lord breaks forth from the tomb. This year, by underscoring our pilgrimage with the words of some of the great Lenten hymns, the hope is that we will multiply the benefits of the spiritual journey we are taking together.

With that in mind, we turn our attention to this evening’s selection: *Jesus, I Will Ponder Now*, the hymn we just sang (and I’d encourage you to open your hymnals and keep it handy where you can see it because I’ll be making reference to its words a little later). It’s an oldie. It was written by an old German Lutheran named Sigismund von Birken, the same fellow who wrote *Let Us Ever Walk with Jesus*. It first appeared in a hymnal published in 1653, and it’s been a favorite in the Lutheran Church ever since. The reason is that like so many other great hymns, it’s more than words set to music; it’s also a prayerful meditation – a little sermon, if you will. And like all sermons it’s based upon texts from Scripture. Some of these verses are listed at the bottom right of the hymn. Oddly, the verses listed there are different than those listed for this same hymn in the old TLH hymnal. In that version the text for this hymn is Luke 18:31-34. Let me read that for you:

Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, “We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again.”

The disciples did not understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about.

Isn't that amazing? Jesus tells his disciples in unmistakable terms exactly what is about to transpire, and they don't get it. They don't get *any* of it. And it isn't because they were dimwitted and slow. No, the passage actually says that the meaning of his words was *hidden* from them. They *couldn't* understand. Something was preventing it. What was that something? The same thing that blocks all human hearts and minds from understanding the things of God: it was their sin. The Scriptures tell us that the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not understand the things that come from him nor can it do so, for such things are spiritually discerned. Without the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the message of the cross is utter foolishness. No one can understand it. The sinful human heart naturally gravitates toward what is attractive, pleasurable, and brings glory to itself. It turns away in disgust from shame, disgrace, humiliation, and pain, and so it simply cannot understand the cross. It's not until after his resurrection when the atonement for sin has been completed and Jesus breathes on his disciples the Holy Spirit that they can begin to understand what it was all about.

The important thing to see is that we too suffer from the blinding effects of sin. And as we consider the history of the church, or as we look around today, we can see all kinds of examples of people failing to really understand what the Lord's suffering and death was all about.

You probably know that in the Middle Ages, reviewing the passion story often led to the persecution of Jews by Christians. When believers thought about the terrible things their Lord had suffered at the hands of his fellow Jews, they were enraged, and they imagined that they could show their devotion to Jesus by taking revenge on the descendants of those who had handed him over to death. It's hard to know where even to start to say what's wrong with that sort of thinking. There's nothing Christian about it. But unchristian as it is, it's sad to say that in some places the idea persists. You may remember that when Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* was about to be released back in 2004, it was strongly opposed by some Jewish groups who feared it would provoke violent reprisals. I experienced a similar kind of thinking when I lived in Brazil. There it's common for people to make life-sized effigies of Judas of sticks and straw and scraps of cloth. On Good Friday they hang these images in the open air markets and throw things and shout curses at them. And then, the following day, they cut them down, and angry crowds beat them, spit on them, and eventually burn them all in an effort to show their faithfulness to Jesus. The thought is that I show my love for the Lord by the fury with which I beat up a dummy that represents the man who betrayed him. But you see the problem here: both these ideas put me on Jesus' side against his enemies. It makes me the good guy defending the Lord against those who would hurt him – sort of like when Peter pulled out his sword in the Garden of Gethsemane and started flailing it around. It's futile, it's wrong – as if Jesus needs me to rescue him! It misses the whole point of the Passion.

Another common but mistaken approach to pondering the passion is to focus upon its grim details merely to create feelings of sympathy for Jesus. Now, on one hand, it's only natural. When we see his "great distress, anguish, and affliction" and consider the brutality of his beatings and the horrors of the cross, we are compelled to feel bad for him. We'd feel bad about seeing *anyone* suffer so. And again, if you've ever viewed *The Passion of the Christ*, especially in the theater when it was released, you know how deeply it affected people – even people who are not Christian. We naturally feel sorry for anyone who endures such awful pain. It's compounded by knowing that it's so completely undeserved. I mean, we want to see bad guys get their due – we don't mind seeing them suffer a little; but we always feel sad when we

see somebody innocent being hurt. It's so unjust; so unfair. And that's true; but the mistake is to stop right there. You see, the reason we feel bad about it is not so much because we understand Jesus' Passion; rather it's that we're identifying with him as the victim. We're still mentally placing ourselves on his side against his enemies, except instead of actively lashing out against them like before; now we place ourselves vicariously with Jesus receiving their attacks. The result is that we can soothe our consciences and feel good about how much compassion we have for Jesus; but this too misses the point.

And while I'm talking about ways to wrong-headedly ponder the passion, I should mention one more. These days in some Christian circles it's become popular to see the passion of our Lord as sort of a moral example for the rest of us. When this happens, Jesus is portrayed as someone who was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for what he believed in, and inspired by him we should be willing to do the same. The thought is that Jesus was something of a radical peacenik who promoted ideas of social equality and justice far ahead of his time, and so he was killed by the entrenched establishment that was fighting to preserve the evil status quo. Following Jesus, then, is all about continuing his cause to stamp out poverty, injustice, discrimination, and war no matter what the cost. People who see it this way do not attribute any atoning or redeeming value to the Lord's passion. In fact, they're usually offended by the idea that the God of heaven would be so barbaric as to demand some kind of sacrifice for sin.

So in all this, I hope you see how easy it is to ponder the passion of our Lord and still gain no spiritual benefit from it. That's why this hymn about pondering the passion of our Lord is really a prayer – a prayer that begins with a request that the Lord will send his Spirit to help us understand what it's all about. "With your Spirit me endow for such meditation", we sang. These words acknowledge that we cannot properly apprehend its significance without illumination from above. But it's vital that we do understand it because, as the first verse continues, if we don't properly understand the cross and cherish what the Lord did for us there, we will certainly perish.

In the second verse, our attention is directed to the details of the Lord's suffering. Named are the instruments of his anguish: the bonds, the scourge, the nails, the spear, the crown of thorns. Even the mocking and brutality of the soldiers is hinted at. It's all quite vivid, as it should be: we need to see what terrible suffering our Lord endured – and yes, it should shock us and move us to pity. But the crucial thing is that we not stop there. We have to ask the question, "Why? Why is the Lord made to suffer so?" The answer is given in verse three: "*I* also, and *my* sin wrought your deep affliction." We miss the point of the passion entirely if we fail to grasp that he is suffering *for us* – in our place. And more than that, even though we were not physically present, through our sins we really are the ones inflicting the pain on Jesus. The hymn writer directs you to see yourself in the angry, mocking crowd, spitting, cursing, hitting him, driving the nails. When you see the suffering Lord you are to think, "*I* did that to him." That's what it means to say, "He died for *my* sin."

That thought should move us to yet greater repentance, which is the idea captured in the first part of verse four: "Grant that I your Passion view with repentant grieving." Looking at the suffering of Jesus, we should see the frightful price God's justice demands for sin – and it should produce in us a certain amount of horror to know that every sin we commit, no matter how slight it may seem to us, directly affects the Lord Jesus so. The prayer here is that God would use that truth to break our sinful hearts. The rest of verse four is a prayer that seeing the suffering of Jesus in that light should also be motivation for us to try to stop sinning in the future. In fact, the next line, where it says, "Let me not bring shame to you, by unholy living" was quite a bit stronger in the old TLH version. There the same line goes, "Nor Thee crucify anew, by

unholy living”. The idea is that if we fall into the cycle of sin, repent, sin, repent, always the same old sin without making an honest effort to change our ways, we are effectively crucifying our Lord over and over again, which would be a truly heartless thing to do. The trouble is, we all do exactly that.

Of course, if that’s where our pondering of the Lord’s passion ended, we’d be in a sorry state indeed. But having now seen how our sin and guilt brought suffering and death upon Jesus, in verse five we are invited to see the Good News there too. Yes, my sin killed him – but at the same time, his suffering was a sacrifice for me and my forgiveness. So the prayer here is, “Now that I’m terrified of my sins, show me, Jesus, how your cross and passion are the assurance that because of your great love you atoned for all my sins.” The prayer is for peace, pardon, and continued trust that through the cross God always forgives all my sin. He cannot do otherwise, for he who prayed, “Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do” continues to pray on my behalf. And the Father always hears and answers the prayers of his beloved Son.

Finally, in verse six, the prayer concludes with the request for a clean new heart to live as a child of God, for strength to bear the crosses that he assigns, for humility, and for perseverance in times of trial and loss. It’s a prayer that the Lord will keep us in the saving faith all our days. And then, having literally dragged us through the depths of death and despair and raised us up again with Christ, the hymn writer leaves us where all good Lutheran hymns end: in heavenly glory with the Lord.

So all together what we see in this sermon set to music is a prayer to the Lord that largely answers itself. In the process of asking for the Lord’s help to ponder the passion correctly, it takes us through all the steps that are necessary to do just that. I can think of no better way for us to begin our Lenten journey together. May our merciful God and Father who gave us his Son to die for us, and who sent us his Spirit so that we can understand and receive this precious gift, keep us now and ever rightly pondering the passion until in his grace he brings us home. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!