

Credo, Third Series, Part One: "Suffered":
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for March 22nd 2020 (Fourth Sunday in Lent/Laetare Sunday)
by Foster Freed

Matthew 16: 21-28

Late last spring—in what now feels like an eternity ago—I came up with the bright idea of devoting a significant chunk of my final year in the Trinity pulpit, to a detailed exposition of the Apostle's Creed, one of the most ancient of the Christian statements of faith, a creed that has shaped the life of the Church Universal for most of its history. I eventually refined my bright idea into a four-pronged affair: four distinct series that would offer six or seven sermons per series, addressing the various facets of the Christian faith, as delineated in the words of the Apostle's Creed. In short: my vision was—and remains—a composite series that would occupy between 24 and 25 sermons across a roughly 10 month span, starting on the final Sunday of August in 2019 and reaching its thundering conclusion on June 28th of the present year, a mere 3 days ahead of my projected retirement. And you know!

Even at the time I was initially plotting all of this, I confess that there was this small voice in the back of my psyche quietly warning me that there was something vaguely presumptuous in the planning of a 25 Sunday sermon series...a voice perhaps **not** so quietly reminding me of the old saying about making God laugh, by telling Him your plans. Undeterred...but with a tendency even back then...to tell myself and others that I planned a series on the Apostle's Creed **if** things worked out, I freely acknowledge that never in a million years would I have anticipated that the sermon I have now set out to write, is one I am highly unlikely ever to have the opportunity to preach to a gathered congregation, a "live-in-studio audience" as they might say in the broadcasting world. And yet...given that the very next phrase in the Creed...

...picking up from where I left off on February 2nd with a sermon on Mary, the Mother of our Lord...

...given that the very next phrase in the Creed—**suffered under Pontius Pilate**—includes a word that is very much on all of our hearts and minds at the present time...

...given the aptness of the word "**suffered**" for the time we are presently enduring, with all of its uncertainty and anxiety...

...I can think of no better way to use a small piece of the time I have been given on this particular day, than to attempt to craft some words—words to share with others one way or the other—words that move us forward on our journey through the Creed...

...diving more deeply into its thick central paragraph, the paragraph that speaks specifically about Jesus Christ: carrying on from where we left off: having named him as the new Joshua, having acclaimed him as the Christ, having spoken of him as God's Son and as our Lord, having celebrated his conception through the Holy Spirit and his miraculous birth of the Virgin Mary...

...having done all that, to now turn the page in order to speak next of the fact that he suffered! How right and proper and fitting it is to make that our next stop! Or is it?

For those of us of any age...but perhaps especially for those of us who live in **this** age, the fact that the Creed jumps from Christ's birth to his suffering and death, may well represent one of the things about the Apostle's Creed with which we are least comfortable. Many years ago I heard a wonderful pastor & preacher—Cliff Elliott—speak of the ancient Creeds, for which he had considerable affection. But he was speaking truthfully when he noted that the creeds tend to offer a portrait of Jesus “from above”...adding that for many of us, that needs to be accompanied by a portrait of Jesus “from the ground up”. Indeed: I have colleagues for whom the jump the Apostle's Creed makes from his birth to his death—its apparent leap from Christmas to Good Friday—more or less disqualifies it as a credal statement they are prepared to utilize. From my perspective—as someone who remains eager to learn from the Apostle's Creed which was, after all, shaped by those who walked the walk of discipleship before us and might still have things to teach us...

...from my perspective, that explains why I have taken a break from the Apostle's Creed over the past 6 weeks...and have attempted to create a six-dimensional “from the ground up” portrait of Jesus—**the life of Jesus**—drawing upon a handful of New Testament texts, all of them taken from Matthew's Gospel. No doubt that portrait was far from complete, but I hope it helped to fill in some of the spaces that would have remained blank—spaces, all of them having to do with the “mission and ministry of the man Jesus of Nazareth”—had we not taken that 6-week break from the Creed. I am glad that we are back...but I do not regret in the least having taken the time to look at Jesus the **Prophet**, Jesus the **Herald**, Jesus the **Healer**, Jesus the **Teacher**, Jesus the **Founder**, and Jesus **the One of Singleness of Heart and Mind**. No regrets although, to be fair, there are at least a handful of voices who might well have told me that there really was no need to take that break from my exposition of the Creed.

One such voice would likely have been that of John Calvin, the impressive 16th century founder of the Reformed family of Churches, a family that includes Scottish Presbyterianism and—by extension—provides part of the backdrop to this United Church of ours. Calvin believed that the Creed was justified in moving swiftly from Christ's birth to his death! Why? Because the events of Christ's life, up to his Passion and death do not belong “to the substance of our redemption”.ⁱ Suffice it to say that I simply do not agree with Calvin on this, strongly believing that Jesus' public ministry—in

all of its varied particulars—most certainly does provide clues, perhaps the key clues, as to who he is and why he came to be among us. It's not often I would say that John Calvin was simply wrong...but this is one instance in which (in fear and trembling) I am prepared to say precisely that! However!

Far more compelling—I think—is the argument Karl Barth offers, making the point that the Creed most certainly does **not** pass over the mission and ministry of Jesus as presented by the New Testament. On the contrary, Barth suggests that it is entirely appropriate to regard that one word...

...the word **suffered**...

...entirely appropriate to regard the phrase "**suffered under Pontius Pilate**"...

...as providing a short-hand summation of Jesus' entire life, certainly his entire adult life. To be honest, my first instinct is to scoff at that suggestion! But then, I recall how Jesus the **prophet**—like so many of the prophets before him—suffered the rejection of his people. I recall how few were those who were prepared to receive the glad tidings offered by Jesus the **Herald**. I recall the anguish caused by his work as a **Healer**: his costly identification with those into whose life he entered to bring the spark of God's healing love. I recall, as well, the obstinate stupidity of those he sought to **teach**, including even his inner circle of disciples. As for his **founding** of the Church: even Simon Peter, the so-called rock on which the Church was to be built, even Simon chastised Jesus as soon as the Lord began to speak of the suffering he would endure as the Christ. Finally...as the one who devoted himself to God with **singleness of heart and mind**, how could so singular a mission not have entailed for Jesus setting to one side, with almost ruthless determination, so many of the things that provide comfort and contentment to the lives most human beings lead. How could he have not suffered? Indeed, as Barth rightly notes: the New Testament explicitly tells us that Jesus wept; nowhere does it explicitly tell us that Jesus laughed.ⁱⁱ

I have been starkly aware this past week...starkly aware of the fact that our text...

...a text that follows immediately upon the heels of Simon Peter naming Jesus as the Christ, as the Messiah...

...I have been hyper-aware that our text contains a solemn announcement of the suffering Jesus the Messiah expects to endure. *From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.*ⁱⁱⁱ Simon Peter—the same Simon Peter who has just received the Master's praise for naming him Messiah—receives a quick and a sharp rebuke when he tries to convince Jesus...

...or is he really trying to convince himself?...

...that the path of suffering is **not** the one Jesus ought to pursue. Not only does Simon receive that rebuke, but his words also form the occasion that prompts Jesus to invite all of his followers to take up **their** Cross...and follow him,^{iv} words which have inspired no shortage of Christian sacrifice and Christian heroism but, frankly, words which have also encouraged forms of piety with which I have yet to make my peace. Indeed!

No doubt encouraged to do so by the COVID-19 pandemic, presently weighing so heavily on all of our hearts and minds...as well as by the fact that I am something of a sucker for punishment...

...I spent two hours Friday morning watching (likely for the fourth or fifth time in my life) Swedish Director Ingmar Bergman's early masterpiece, *The Seventh Seal*. Set in the Medieval world—centered on the journey being undertaken by a Christian Knight and his servant, returning home after 10 years fighting in one of the Crusades—the film is set against the backdrop of the Plague ravishing Europe. In a film that overflows with unforgettable scenes and images, none is more powerful than its depiction of an overwrought line of Christian penitents: some of them whipping their own backs, some of them whipping the backs of others of their companions, the entire procession testifying to their essential agreement with their “hellfire and damnation” preacher who begins his sermon (when they arrive at the town-square) by proclaiming: “God has sent His punishment down on us.” And yes, I am utterly certain that there are no shortage of preachers (Christian and otherwise) who—in light of the Corona-virus plague we are currently enduring—would be only too happy to make those words their own. And yes...I suspect there is a tiny part of our own psyches which cannot help but wonder...as we wash our hands raw...and practice social isolation....

...a tiny part of our own psyches that have no choice not only to ask “what does it all mean?” but also: “Where is God in all of this?” Does God—like the preacher in Bergman's film—delight in our worry, our anxiety, our suffering? Indeed: does God—like the preacher in Bergman's film—regard us with ill-disguised contempt? And yes: perhaps more to the point: when Christ invites us...

...better still, when Christ **commands** us, to take up our Cross and follow Him...

...is that an invitation to suffering as an end in itself? An invitation to the kind of world-despising piety many Christians have practiced over the centuries? A way of discipleship—a way of following Christ—that despises our laughter...that only values our tears? A spirituality in which the fact that we are “dust” and to dust we shall return...shadows all that we have...all that we are...all that we are meant to experience....in the midst of this veil of tears?

Permit me...permit me as I bring these rambling thoughts to a close...permit to try to answer those questions by naming something which the experience of the past few weeks has brought home—brought home to me, at any rate—in an especially decisive way. You see...part of what the increasingly tense experience of the past couple of weeks has meant for me, as a backdrop to my hearing the Creed speak of Christ's having "**suffered under Pontius Pilate**", as the backdrop to my hearing the Gospel's invitation for us to "**take up our Cross and follow**"...

...part of what it has meant for me to hear the Creed and the scriptures against the backdrop of COVID-19...

...involves the impossible to deny fact that "suffering" has found us: **we did not need to go out looking for it**. Nor did we need extensively to rummage about in order to find "crosses" to bear...although we most certainly can and perhaps all too often will...find a way to evade bearing those crosses. My point is this.

Living as we do, at what is inarguably the most scientifically and technologically advanced moment in human history, has not altered the most essential fact about human existence, not only that we are mortal, but that we know full well that we are mortal, deny that though we are always tempted to do. To hear Christ's invitation to take up our Cross as an invitation to become masochists, seekers after suffering is—I believe—to mis-hear that invitation and to do so in an especially problematic way. Surely to God—if the witness of the New Testament is to be trusted—the Cross of Christ must first and foremost be regarded as a sign of his unique mission rather than as a sign of pointless masochism. From the moment of his incarnation—**Word made flesh**—to the moment when he drew his final breath on the Cross, I believe that Christ did not seek out suffering as an end in itself; he suffered in order to accomplish the mission that was his as God's emissary, indeed as God paying a house-call to this bruised and battered world: seeking our healing, pronouncing our blessing, working out our salvation, all of it culminating on the Cross. Which, of course, strongly suggests...

...strongly suggests that his invitation for us to take up **our** Cross is not an invitation to seek out suffering...but an invitation....

...this is the hard part...this is the scary part...this is the part that challenges every fibre of our being...

...an invitation to take up the crosses that have been thrust into our hands, whether or not we believe ourselves ready to receive them and capable of lifting them. To find ways within the paradoxical context in which we presently find ourselves...

...finding ways to share light and life and love with one another—friends and strangers alike—but doing so within what we pray will be the

temporary confines of a world knee deep in the strange practices of “social-distancing”. Taking up the cross of compassion. Taking up the cross of forbearance. Taking up the cross of generosity. Perhaps most challenging of all, taking up the cross of gratitude at a time when fear threatens to make gratitude seem like a fool’s game. In short: throwing ourselves into the tasks at hand...living one day at a time...at times living one heartbeat at a time...and doing so mindful not only that we live in God’s world...but that in Jesus Christ (and this is the true miracle), God has chosen to live in **our** world. Seeking the faith, the hope and the love to sustain us. And yes: acknowledging that the most needed gift of all for such a time as this may well be the gift of courage.

May Christ’s willingness to take up His Cross ready us, and steady us, for the living of these days! Thanks be to God!

ⁱ Quoted in Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), p. 101.

ⁱⁱ Barth, p. 102. It should be noted that Barth adds the following: “Although it is certainly not without amazement that we several times hear of Jesus weeping, but never that He laughed, it has still to be said that continuously through His suffering there was a kind of glint of joy in nature around Him, in children, and above all, of joy in His existence and in His mission.”

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 16:21

^{iv} Matthew 16:24