

Sermon for Sunday November 20, 2022 – Reign of Christ
 Luke 23:33-42

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you O God, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen

When I hear this story from the Gospel of Luke I imagine a grand art gallery painting. Imagine this story with me, not in words, but as a picture. Luke the gospel writer is every bit the artist, and he paints this moment – this climactic moment in the life or near death of Jesus – with the finest of brushstrokes; so, linger in front of the portrait just for a minute with me. Jesus is in the center, on the cross, his body beaten, his clothing gone - taken, and auctioned. On either side the two thieves hang, one on his left, one on his right, and then, in the foreground, the soldiers offering sour wine and mocking looks. The religious leaders, too, are just behind, scoffing at him, pointing fingers, laughing: “If he is the Messiah, let him save himself!”// If you look carefully, you can see the fine print, the inscription over his body: “This is the King of the Jews.” And then, if you squint, in the background you can see the people. This crowd of onlookers. This vague congregation. Luke doesn’t waste his paint on the people. Their faces and expressions are a blur. All he tells us is this: “The people stood by, watching.”

“The people stood by, watching.” But just because they’re in the background doesn’t mean they’re not important. In fact, the people have been driving agents in the events that have led to this portrait in the first place. Only days earlier, Luke describes the gathering storm by reminding us that the chief priests and the scribes are trying to kill Jesus precisely because they’re **afraid of the people**. Ironically then, it’s the people that bring Jesus before Pilate in the first place, and then as you may remember, it **is the crowd** that is shouting “crucify him” and **the crowd** are the ones voting to save Barabbas instead. **So, the tragedy of Luke’s Gospel isn’t that the people are powerless to stop the story; the tragedy is that they have power** but they use it for such violent ends, or as is the case today, they just stay in the background. Maybe they feel helpless. Dumbfounded. Paralyzed. Nevertheless, as you can plainly see, they just stood by, watching.

Perhaps you can imagine other moments, snap shots in time, when “the people stood by watching. ///

Stanley and I were in Grade 4 together. Stanley was a small kid, extra skinny for his age, and he wore very thick glasses. Stanley was smart and quick to correct you if you got the answer wrong. I didn’t much like Stanley, he sat behind me in class and he spent most of his days tugging on my long hair or poking me in the back with his pencil. One afternoon I got so angry with him I swung around in my chair with my arm fully extended and knocked him flat out of his chair and onto the ground. That was the one and only time my parents were invited to come to school and have a chat with my teacher. So one morning at recess, after Stanley made some smart remark to one of the big guys on the play ground, I did not have a whole lot of sympathy for him. When

the big kid picked him up and threw him in a snowbank I might have cheered. It was a very lopsided fight – Stanley was getting the snot kicked out of him. I stood there watching, the kids in my class just stood there watching.

They just stood there watching. I got thinking that our church is a community of people who have a long tradition of standing for things. Standing for things is in the DNA of the church. We have taken some tough stands; we have been willing to take a stand for economic justice, stand for the work of peacemaking and for the right of people to love who they love. We're doing our very best to stand with indigenous people, with survivors of residential schools and for murdered and missing indigenous women.

This standing for things is what we do, and frankly, the church has been good at it. But the playground is so big and things move so fast. And all of **our standing** can amount to **so much watching**. And now, in 2022, the playground is overrun with the brokenness of the world and still, more often than not, we in the church stand and watch.

-In 2022 the gap between haves and have-nots in this country is wider than at any time in living memory - the church cannot stand and watch.

-In 2022 scientists now project that we will blow irreversibly past every conservative threshold for avoiding catastrophic climate change, the church cannot stand and watch.

-In 2022 we face story after story of abuse at the hands of educators and coaches and people we should be able to trust and again the church cannot stand and watch.

I think sometimes we stand and watch, *hoping* I guess that things will get better but really, I think, we are *terrified* that we might have to do something. The reality is that sometimes in order to take a stand you have to move.

Our Jesus was constantly on the move. Healing, teaching, over turning tables of power, proclaiming the good news from the hill side and the lake shore. Jesus is on the move. And even that crowd at the foot of the cross, standing and watching – even they started moving. Only a few chapters later, that same crowd gathers around the Pentecost flame and gets overcome by the power of the Holy Spirit and flows into Jerusalem as the newly courageous apostles going into the world. Eventually, even that crowd gets moving. Eventually, all God's children get moving.

Let me tell you a story about a community of God – moving. In the northwest suburbs of Washington, D.C., there's an orthodox Jewish temple named Ohev Shalom. As an orthodox congregation, they observe fairly strict Sabbath laws, including abstaining from access to the Internet during holy days. And so in summer of 2016, as the congregation emerged late Sunday evening from its worship, for the Jewish holiday of Shavuot, as they pulled out their phones and checked in with the world, they learned what you and I had known all day, about a horrific mass shooting, the night before at Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando. You may remember this news: 49 dead, 53 wounded.

Now, I remember waking up on the morning of Sunday June 12 and hearing the news about what happened. I remember lifting those victims to God in prayer. And then I'm sure I did what I would do on any other Sunday: most likely, I went home, I had lunch, and I took a nap. But at Ohev Shalom they were not so content, and when the services ended that Sunday night, as the congregation began to disperse into the street, the rabbi called them back and told them that they weren't done for the day. Shavuot is a pilgrimage festival, and so they were going to take a pilgrimage, a field trip of solidarity into the city, to a gay bar.

In telling this story, the rabbi writes that he hadn't been to a bar in twenty years, much less a gay one. Nevertheless, off they went, about twelve members of the congregation in their formal worship attire and yarmulkes, and they found their way to Fireplace, a predominantly African-American gay bar in Dupont Circle. Now, you can imagine that portrait, as they come down the sidewalk. Indeed, one man standing outside the club looked at them a little suspiciously. But when they explained what they were doing, he broke down in tears; his cousin had been killed the night before at Pulse. And then they went inside, nobody knowing what to expect. The mood was somber, of course. But it turned out that the two groups had all sorts of things in common. In one case, one of the patron's stepchildren had been Bar Mitzvahed at their temple. Another asked for a card so he could come visit. After a while the bartender shut off the music, and the rabbi began to offer prayers. They lit candles. They sang songs. Tears flowed. Barriers collapsed. And then the temple bought a round of drinks for the house.

Now it's just one little corner of the world, of course. But still. It's amazing what the people of God can do when they're willing to move.

So, here's the good news. **We can linger, but let's not get stuck.** Because the world needs a church that moves. The world needs the church, more than it ever has, but specifically the world needs a church that moves. The world needs a church that moves, just as it always has, from that first Pentecost morning. As the church we need to be rooted in our deepest traditions, to cling to its oldest stories, to stand fast on the very elemental truths of who and what we are called to be. But for a church to stand so firm it must in fact be a church on the move, because it always has been, because those Pentecostal flames are on the move, and they always have been, because Jesus is on the move, and he always has been, and you can't follow Jesus by standing still.

So, here's the good news. We will be on the move. You and I, we will be on the move. Whatever congregation we are today, you and I, we will be on the move. Whatever denomination we are today, you and I, will be on the move. The Church of Jesus Christ will be on the move. And when we feel helpless, and when we feel dumbfounded, and when we feel paralyzed, remember that we do not move alone.

- Remember that we move by the power of Jesus Christ risen from the grave.
- Remember that we move on the wings of the Holy Spirit, that has moved through every time and place.
- Remember that we move alongside the grace of God that has traveled from everlasting to everlasting.

Thanks be to God, Amen.