



Joseph of Arimathea: A Man of Hope

TEXT
Luke 23:50–56

August 11, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

When my kids were little, an important book in our house was *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. Do you know it? Let me read you a bit.

I went to sleep with gum in my mouth and now there's gum in my hair, and when I got out of bed this morning I tripped on my skateboard and by mistake I dropped my sweater in the sink while the water was running, and I could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.

At school, Mrs. Dickens liked Paul's picture of the sailboat better than my picture of the invisible castle. At singing time, she said I sang too loud. At counting time, she said I left out sixteen. Who needs sixteen?

It goes from bad to worse.

There were lima beans for dinner and I hate lima beans. There was kissing on TV, and I hate kissing. My bath was too hot, I got soap in my eyes, my marble went down the drain, and I had to wear my railroad-train pajamas. I hate my railroad-train pajamas. It has been a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. My mom says, some days are like that.

The first time I read this book, I thought mom was going to sweep in with some pearl of wisdom to change the perspective: It could be worse or it's not as bad as you think. But no, mom tells the truth: Some days are like that.

You have probably had a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. If you haven't, you will — because some days are like that.

The question of our faith is not “How do we escape the bad days?” The question is “Who will we be when they come?” One thing I hope is that on your worst days, you know a person like Joseph of Arimathea.

It takes a couple chapters for Luke to walk through the details of Jesus' trial, torture and death. When Jesus breathes his last, Luke tells us of a guy named Joseph. Not the husband of Mary; that Joseph is at the beginning of the story of Jesus. This is Joseph of Arimathea. Some think Joseph was a follower of Jesus; others say that was not likely. Apart from this moment, at the death of Jesus, he is unmentioned. And yet Luke knows him well. Joseph is a member of the council, and he is a good and righteous man.

Joseph asks for the body of Jesus. That took courage. Crucifixion was not just intended to

put people to death. It was not just intended to torture them. It was intended to humiliate them, to demean them.

It is said that 100 years before Jesus, the Roman slave rebellion, led by Spartacus, was finally quashed in the year 71 BCE. The Roman general Pompey was reported to have captured 6,000 slaves and crucified them all, lining the road with crosses for over 100 miles. As they died, their corpses were left hanging for animals and nature to take its course. Crucifixion was not just a means of torture; it was a means of humiliation. It was a celebration of humiliation.

But that kind of celebration actually destroys the one thing it endeavors to protect: civilization. They wanted to humiliate Jesus. But Joseph wanted his body that he might be buried. That took courage. And I suppose his courage came from the fact that Joseph was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. If I understand the text, this is the reason we know about this man. He was waiting expectantly for the promised day of God.

He faced maybe the worst day in history, for this is the day that reveals the human desire to destroy God — the human desire to remove God from our story; to

set God's way aside and adopt our own ways. And in killing Jesus, what was actually happening is we were killing ourselves. It was a terrible, horrible, evil day.

And on this evil day, while Joseph holds the lifeless body of Jesus in his arms, on this day when hope has been placed breathless in a tomb, Joseph was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. Even on this day, Joseph expects God to be God, and he lives toward God's promised day — a day when communities will not be defined by hatred; a day when the common language will not be vocabulary of incivility, but a day of justice and kindness and community.

If hope can be trusted on that dark Friday, it can and must be trusted any day, every day.

If you haven't had a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day, you will. You will have days when the hope in you has been crucified; when you feel that the hatred and the increasing incivility in the world is too much. On your worst day, you are going to want to know a guy like Joseph.

If I understand the text, there are two ways Joseph mentors us. Joseph "refused to give up on a world that God refuses to give up on."¹ And Joseph takes the long view. He refuses to let the news of the day define his character or convictions.

At the Session meeting on Monday, the Elders took some time to remember some of the history of the Village family. We remembered the season of explosive growth in the early years. We remembered the work

of congregational care and your practice of standing with one another in times of sorrow. We remembered the commitment to worship and music that is magnetic. We remembered efforts in mission like the DRMP, Front Porch, the Food Pantry and Antioch. It was an inspiring conversation. If you pay attention to what God has done through the Village family, it's hard not to be inspired.

In 2004, I took Dr. Bob to Panera for a bowl of soup. I asked him, as a new pastor at Village, "What are the moments of Village's history that I need to know?" Without hesitation, he said, "The Black Motivational Training Center." It was a ministry in 1970 with a kind of creepy very 1970s kind of name. But it was a bold effort in battling institutional racism.

In November of 1969, the Session voted that \$100,000 be given to this ministry to create job opportunities for people of color. But the pledges came up short. The Session decided to forge ahead, and 1970 was the first time Village had a deficit budget. The Session invited the congregation to approve this budget and the commitment to give \$100,000 to the BMTC. The motion was approved with 98 percent of the congregation voting in favor. It wasn't the cure-all in battling institutional racism, but it was the step we could take in 1970.

I have spoken to you of this before. It's important for us to remember these moments. But let me tell you some of our story I have never shared before.

In December of 1957, Dr. Bob asked the Session to extend an invitation to Rev. Abraham Lincoln Reynolds, an African American Presbyterian pastor. Dr. Bob suggested it would be good for us to invite him to preach from this pulpit. The Session discussed it, and when it came time to extend the invitation, not a single Elder would make the motion. No invitation was extended.

A year later, in 1958, the Session considered a pulpit exchange with St. Stephen Baptist Church, an African American congregation here in Kansas City. Their pastor would preach here and Dr. Bob would preach there. Elder Gordon Suor, I'm not sure how his name would be pronounced, moved that we hold this pulpit exchange. But his motion died for lack of a second. As we look at the days of our being the church, these were some terrible, horrible, no good days.

But Dr. Bob and many of you were like Joseph of Arimathea. You took the long view, and you refused to give up on a world God refuses to give up on — and you waited expectantly for the kingdom of God.

And in a matter of just 13 years, this church moved from unable to invite a person of color to join us for one Sunday to committing more money than we had with a 98 percent endorsement to battle the attitudes we had held ourselves just a few years before.

The story of the faith and the story of this church teaches us to take the long view and to refuse to give up on the world God has refused to give up on;

to live every day toward God's promised day.

These days, you don't have to wake up with gum in your hair to worry whether this will be a good day or not.

Mattie Rigsby is the 78-year-old heroine of Clyde Edgerton's novel *Walking Across Egypt*. She's "slowin' down," she says. At 78, you can't blame her. Rather than bemoan the fact that she is, as she says, "almost outta here," she thinks dying soon might be a good thing. "If I lived 40 more years," she says, "I might outlive the loss of everything good."

Sometimes I think I know what she means.

There is a lot of hate in our culture. It is not uncommon to witness the humiliation and belittling of others, and to see it done in a spirit of celebration ... of wanting them to go back somewhere; of wanting to protect some little cultural and racial silo, shouting with jubilation, "You will not replace us." So, it can be no surprise that we came to church last Sunday with tender hearts because, once again, a young man dreaming dreams far different from the kinds that I dreamed of as a youth, drove all day long, just so he could murder people he had never met because they were Latino. These are dark days.

Sixty years ago, we spoke of lynching — when a mob gathered around a single person of color, or maybe a few, and murdered them in public. Today we are seeing the reverse of that calculous, as a single person can murder scores of individuals.

When it comes to matters of racism and violence in America,

we are going backwards. There are many who wish to lead us in the wrong direction. They are doing their best to remove God from our story.

We have been here before, and there have been far worse days no doubt. Faith makes no promise to escape days like these, but who we are in the midst of them, it matters.

So, when you find yourself asking if hope is within you, if you worry you might outlive the loss of everything good, remember Joseph. For in the world's darkest hour, with the lifeless body of Jesus in his hands, this good and righteous man took the long view, and he expected God to be God, and he refused to give up on a world that God refuses to give up on.

Joseph is not only a person like us, but we can be people like him.

I can't see the dawn of that new day — a day when it will just make more sense for us to care for each other and welcome each other and celebrate each other rather than demean and belittle and compete and crucify each other.

I can't see the dawn of that new day, but believe that God is God, and the powers that seek to destroy us are not. So, even on days when hope is closed up in the tomb, trust that resurrection is coming, and a new day will dawn. Refuse to give up. Take the long view and let us live toward that promised day.

¹I have lost the citation at present, but I am grateful to Dr.

Doug Ottati for this phrase and insight.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.