

Luke 23:32-49
April 13, 2025

Acts of God

In the legal and insurance context rather comically, an “act of God,” refers to a *natural* event, like a flood or an earthquake, something that is beyond human control and cannot be reasonably foreseen or prevented. It serves as a defense against breach of contract if the event makes fulfilling obligations impossible or impractical. It alleviates responsibility. It may be thought of as an inevitable accident.

Palm Sunday is one of the most interesting Sundays of the year. It marks the beginning of Holy Week, the week of Christ’s Passion. The worship of the day is a mix between Palm Sunday remembrances, and those of Good Friday. The former is triumphant, but with something out of place. The latter is tragic, even though it is good.

Because next Sunday is Easter, if nothing is said about Good Friday today, then the risk is run of skipping it altogether, which would leave a situation in which the resurrection is celebrated without an observation of the death.

So the service today is a hybrid; part Triumphal Entry, part Crucifixion. It moves quickly from the incident at the gate on Sunday to the incident outside the gate on Friday at the hill known as, “the Place of the Skull.”

The actual gospel reading for the day is very long, almost two full chapters; beginning with the Last

Supper, as described in Luke’s gospel, all the way to the burial on Friday afternoon including; the institution of the Lord’s Supper, the prediction of betrayal and denial, the prayer in the garden, the arrest and the trials, the conviction and sentencing, all the way to the death of Jesus. It represents a different way of thinking about an act of God. Today we have heard the part of this text that refers to the time when Jesus was on the cross.

One of the traditions of the church is to speak of the Seven Last Words of Christ. The four gospels differ. This year the focus is on the Gospel of Luke which includes three sayings. They are;

“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing;”

“I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in Paradise;” and,

“Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit.”

When Jesus entered the city at the beginning of the week, he was hailed as a king. It stands to reason that most of the people understood it to be an earthly king, the restoration of David’s dynasty in Judea. They anticipated the driving out and victory over Roman power, which was implied in their chanting, “blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”

In Mark’s gospel, they even say, “blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David.” In John,

“blessed is the King of Israel.” There were high hopes and big expectations.

From the start things went awry. The first thing that went sideways, at least the way Luke tells it, was at the temple, when Jesus was presumably expected to offer a sacrifice fit for the coronation of a king. Instead he threw a fit at the marketing of religious faith, a sacred trust broken by those turning a profit.

After that incident, there were a few days of contentious dialogues with various factions among the leadership; scribes and pharisees and sadducees, and the like. The Romans, I am convinced, were not very concerned. They knew they could easily quell a disturbance by force, which, of course, they did.

Apparently, with such a large crowd of people in town for the festival, Jesus could easily disappear and become hard to find. At the time, Roman headquarters were *not* in Jerusalem, but over on the coast at a place called, “Caesaria Maritima,” or, “Caesaria by the Sea.” They were not present in full force. They made a deal with one of the followers of Jesus. We all know the story of Judas Iscariot. They were led to a garden on the Mount of Olives and arrested Jesus there.

There were hearings before the Jewish council, the Herodian King Antipas, and Pontius Pilate himself. There were false charges, a very quick verdict, sentencing, and execution, all in a matter of hours.

We learn from all four of the gospels that the leaders, both Roman and Jewish, as well as the followers of Jesus, and we must include them, saw only one level of interpretation. Neither Pilate nor any of the rest showed any signs of being aware of a higher level of meaning. They saw only the mundane history of it all, not anything to do with a decisive act of God.

There was, however, a decisive act of God, a divine reckoning. It was God’s redeeming of humanity, of *all* creation. Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing.” In the worldly sense, they knew *exactly* what they were doing. They did not see the eternal ramifications. Not seeing the eternal ramifications of the acts of God is one of the marks of humanity and is a characteristic of sinfulness and rebellion. It requires being forgiven.

Just for the sake of a review, listen to some of the other acts of God. The first, “act of God,” is a Word spoken, a decision made. Then came Creation, which is the first result of that decision. The second result of that decision is freedom given to the creature. Though it is limited, it is sufficient to produce authenticity, and the possibility of disobedience, responsibility. And then there is the Redemption of the world.

That redemption begins with the Election of Israel, and continues until it reaches the surest representation of all God’s decisive acts, found in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the incarnation of God in history.

To these we may add the gift of the Holy Spirit and the promise of the reckoning at the end of the age, yet to come. On the cross, Jesus recognized the human failure to see, and forgave it.

We inherit both the failures to see common to humanity, and the forgiveness that restores and enlightens. That is the reason for the observation and celebration of Palm Sunday and Good Friday.

Palm Sunday represents the failure to see. It is the misinterpretation of the divine life writ large. In this sense it is tragic before it is triumphant. It is humanity at its most vulnerable.

Good Friday is God's forgiveness and acceptance in the face of human arrogance, in the face of the belief that the essential problem of human life can be solved by human decision-making and action.

The juxtaposition of the two presents us with the contrast between the human and divine ways of understanding our lives; the difference between how people tend to see the importance of things that happen, and how God sees things; the things of earth, and the things of heaven. It compels us to think.

But our most important celebration and observance regarding these acts of God is not in the worship services we attend each year, but in the faithful living of our lives. There is here no inevitable accident. The move from Palm Sunday to Good Friday is not a natural event. Human faithfulness is a divine gift.

It is the grace of God given in the proclamation of the gospel. And it changes everything. In accepting God's decisive act of redemption in Christ Jesus, we allow our lives to be re-ordered in humility towards the commands and promises of God. We hear the words that summarize these actions and promises; God has loved . . . you shall love . . . We wait . . . for Easter.

Romans 15

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. 2 Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up. 3 For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.” 4 For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.

5 May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, 6 so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

7 Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. 8 For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God’s truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed 9 and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written:

“Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles;
I will sing the praises of your name.”

10 Again, it says,

“Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people.”

11 And again,

“Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles;
let all the peoples extol him.”

12 And again, Isaiah says,

“The Root of Jesse will spring up,
one who will arise to rule over the nations;
in him the Gentiles will hope.”

13 May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Paul the Minister to the Gentiles

14 I myself am convinced, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with knowledge and competent to instruct one another.

15 Yet I have written you quite boldly on some points to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me 16 to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles. He gave me the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

17 Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. 18 I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done— 19 by the power of signs and wonders, through the power of the Spirit of God. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ. 20 It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else’s foundation. 21 Rather, as it is written: “Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand.”

22 This is why I have often been hindered from coming to you.

Paul's Plan to Visit Rome

23 But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to visit you, 24 I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to see you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while. 25 Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the Lord's people there. 26 For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the Lord's people in Jerusalem. 27 They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings. 28 So after I have completed this task and have made sure that they have received this contribution, I will go to Spain and visit you on the way. 29 I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ.

30 I urge you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. 31 Pray that I may be kept safe from the unbelievers in Judea and that the contribution I take to Jerusalem may be favorably received by the Lord's people there, 32 so that I may come to you with joy, by God's will, and in your company be refreshed. 33 The God of peace be with you all. Amen.

[Back](#)

[Home](#)