

Remembering Jesus of Nazareth

Written for Good Friday, 2023

The invitation from my friend, Greg, was irresistible. "If there was a memorial service for Jesus, what would Nicodemus say in a eulogy?"

Here's what I wrote. The eulogy part will be part of the service on Good Friday evening. The rest I wrote to help myself think through the moment.

+++

Nick hated days like today.

As clergy, he knew, people expected that he would be good at death. People looked to him for answers, for meaning, for compassion. His study meant that he should be able to explain and defend God and death and life and why these excruciating moments were acceptable and necessary.

He always worked hard to be helpful. But he never liked it.

And on days like today, it would be worse. He knew the man who had been buried.

And not just knew him, Nick respected him. Talked with him. Shifted his life because of those conversations. Had been at the graveside.

They weren't friends. They couldn't be. They weren't on the same theological page. Not as far as people could tell. But there was much that people didn't really know.

His wife touched his arm. He realized they were standing outside the door they'd been told of. He had no idea how long they had been standing here. His legs shook, but it wasn't from the walk or from the wait. Since the earthquake, since the spectacle, since the death, nothing was stable/solid.

She asked if he was ready. He wasn't but he nodded.

They climbed the steps and were in the room. She sat in the back. He walked up the side aisle, knowing that everyone was watching him. No one wanted him there. Not really.

Nick nodded to the leader of the service.

He knew the leader's family well. He'd been to a funeral in their family not long before.

But Nick kept his distance. His colleagues had been angry at the family, at the leader of tonight's gathering. And the family had been uncertain, then terrified of his colleagues.

Finally, the service started.

Everyone who spoke had been good friends, had been relatives, had been changed.

They talked about time together, about ways their lives were different because of that time. They talked about their deep sense of loss.

It was his turn. The time to pull himself together, to pull this despair together, to give meaning. But this would be the hardest eulogy ever.

+++

Thank you, Lazarus.

Mary, I'm sorry. This is hard.
Mary, Andrew, Peter.

Joseph, thank you for asking me to help with, you know. And now.

I know that some of you are uncomfortable with me being here. I understand. My former colleagues have been brutal. Some of them conspired for this moment. To say that I'm sorry is meaningless.

But I'm grateful for this opportunity to be here to talk about him.

Some of you may not know that I've been following his work with deep interest for the last few years. He was so different.

As a teacher, He always spoke without footnotes, without constantly justifying everything he said by what every other scholar had said.

But he actually knew what all those scholars said. And somehow, he sliced through the layers of commentary as if he clearly understood the meaning behind the words. As if, somehow, he actually knew Yahweh.

Face to face. Heart to heart.

After listening to him teach, I went to see him one night. Alone. Some of you did that too, I'm guessing.

His words that night startled me. When I asked him about something he had said, he looked at me and said, “You call yourself a teacher?”¹

I thought I was. So, after our conversation that night, I went back to my studies. I wanted to understand what he was trying to do.

While you were listening and learning, Andrew, I’ve been searching and studying. I’ve been learning more and more about the one to come.

It’s a little funny, actually. You don’t know this. But when my former colleagues were trying to figure out how to trap him, I brought up due process. They accused me of being from Galilee, too. It wasn’t a compliment. And they said, “Examine the Scriptures”.²

It’s what I had been doing.

You know, when people who oppose each other each say, “Read the law and the prophets,” it’s clear what to do. It’s clear where the answer will be. In the law and the prophets.

So that’s what I’ve been doing.

That night when we talked, he mentioned the bronze snake. Our forefathers grumbled about the length of the journey. They grumbled about the way of Yahweh. And there were snakes. Fiery biting snakes.³

And, as he said that night, Moses put a serpent made of bronze up on a pole where people could look and be healed. We don’t really understand why Moses did *that*.

I didn’t know why that obscure story was mentioned that night. Unless it was to make me think of it tonight.

Because we saw him lifted up, just like he said.

We heard him groan, “My God, why have you forsaken me.”⁴ It was like a punch. But it echoed so closely the words of the psalmist. The feeling of desertion and desperation.

And the words of Isaiah. All day I’ve been reflecting on them. It is almost as if they were being written tonight. It’s almost as if they were written for tonight.

¹ John 3:10

² John 7:49-51

³ Numbers 21

⁴ Psalm 22

“He was despised and abandoned by men,
A man of great pain and familiar with sickness;
And like one from whom *people* hide their faces,
He was despised, and we had no regard for Him.
However, *it was* our sicknesses *that* He Himself bore,
And our pains *that* He carried;
Yet we ourselves assumed that He had been afflicted,
Struck down by God, and humiliated.
But He was pierced for our offenses,
He was crushed for our wrongdoings;
The punishment for our well-being *was laid* upon Him,
And by His wounds we are healed.
All of us, like sheep, have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way;
But the LORD has caused the wrongdoing of us all
To fall on Him.
He was oppressed and afflicted,
Yet He did not open His mouth;
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,
So He did not open His mouth.
By oppression and judgment He was taken away;
And as for His generation, who considered
That He was cut off from the land of the living
For the wrongdoing of my people, to whom the blow *was due?*
And His grave was assigned with wicked men,
Yet He was with a rich man in His death,
Because He had done no violence,
Nor was there any deceit in His mouth.
But the LORD desired
To crush Him, causing *Him* grief;
If He renders Himself *as* a guilt offering . . .”⁵

Some of us thought he was the one.
Some of us feared that he was the one
And now we all are wondering.

Was he the one? Was that the offering?
Is this the end? Or the start?

I don't know what's next.

⁵ Isaiah 52:2-10, NASB

I've lost everything to stand here. Joining Joseph last night as we wrapped the body, that felt like the end of everything.

The end of my career.

The end of my relationships.

The end of everything I've known.

I feel like I, and you, and everything we thought about how to live, was buried with him.

It's not the end of my studies or the end of my questions. I have a sense that there is something more, something we've missed – you who have watched and listened, I who have studied.

There is something more.

If anyone understands, it may be you Lazarus.

For the rest of us, we wait. For the consolation.

+++

He sat down.

There was a simple blessing.

He listened, through the darkness, to the familiar words.

“The Lord make his face shine on you.”

Nothing was shining.

He found his wife.

They went down the steps and into the darkness.