

## **Pentecost 24, Year C,**

Sermon by Rev. Glenn A. Brumbaugh

24<sup>th</sup> November, 2019

**Colossians 1:11-20 NIV / Luke 23: 33-43 NRSV**

It seems strange reading the crucifixion story

just before we spend a month in anticipation of the arrival

of the hope we find in this life we are now reading of the end of.

It's kind of anticlimactic, isn't it?

Yet these two tales are very much related.

Next week we will begin to look at the hope the arrival of Emmanuel,

God with us, brings,

and this week we see the fulfillment of that hope.

Next week we step back to a world hopelessly stuck

in the rut of ritual obedience

seeking the promise of a life transformed.

Yet that seems little solace in light of the abject bleakness of today's reading.

Like it or not, it's where the story we've been following all year leads,

to torture and death on a cross.

It's a tale of contrasting worlds.

The world the way it's always been,

and the world the way it could be, the way it was meant to be;

the world of men and the world of God.

I say the world of men because that's what it was, ruled and dominated by men.

It was a world based on wealth and power,  
where everyone had their place and status,  
with men having total control of all aspects  
of how things worked in that world.

They decided who married who, who was worthy and who was not.

You had those of prestige in charge and everyone else,  
those who were in, and those who were out.

The system was set by those at the top,  
and they set the order by which everything worked in society.

Deviation from that system was not tolerated.

To maintain compliance, any challenge to the status quo  
was met with brutal reprisal.

It had to be clear that the consequences of rebellion of any kind  
would be reliably severe.

And that system worked, particularly well for those at the top,  
but also enough to give everyone else just enough to get by, mostly.

But what happens when something unforeseen comes along  
and throws a wrench in the system,  
such as a natural disaster, a plague, a famine, or an economic downturn?

How do they justify such a flaw  
when those not at the top see the system breaking down?

Easy, they put the blame on one of those groups not deemed to be worthy,  
one of the groups not deemed worthy to be “in.”

You isolate a sacrificial victim or group of victims, “a scapegoat,”  
and eliminate the identified “cause” of the problem.

Often, you ritualize this purge, creating a sacred myth to justify it,  
often making the victim’s demise a holy sacrifice to justify the violence.

In Jesus’ culture, that concept was an old, familiar one that was easy to implement.

The term “scapegoat” comes from a story in Leviticus.

In that story Aaron is told to bring a goat before God in the tabernacle,  
a goat that is to bare the sins of the people.

Once the guilt is assigned, the goat is released to the wilderness  
to suffer and die alone, innocent and bearing the sins of Israel.

Sociologist Peter Glick points out that

“Scapegoat theory refers to the tendency  
to blame someone else for one’s own problems,  
a process that often results in feelings of prejudice  
toward the person or group that one is blaming.

Scapegoating serves as an opportunity to explain failure or misdeeds,  
while maintaining one’s positive self-image.”

An example he gives is if a person who is poor or doesn’t get a job  
that he or she applies for can blame an unfair system  
or the people who did get the job that he or she wanted,

the person may be using the others as a scapegoat  
and may end up hating them as a result.

Essentially, scapegoating generally employs a stand-in for one's own failures,  
or the failures of the system one depends on,  
so that one doesn't have to face one's own weaknesses  
or the shortcomings of the system to which one belongs.

There is clear archaeological evidence that ritualistic scapegoating  
has been a part of human society since the beginning.

Some have even argued that it was necessary for social cohesion,  
for the majority to be able to maintain unity and identity.

Without an agreed upon focus for the tension and resulting violence  
that was built in to a social group,

they would turn on each other and make society unworkable.

And while that may seem barbaric and uncivilized to our refined 21st century minds,  
is it really so far-fetched and remote from us?

Glick points out that history is full of examples of those in the majority  
producing scapegoats to bear the blame  
for their own shortcomings as a society.

Ironically to our gospel story today, throughout Western history,

it's often been the Jewish people

For most of European history, the Jews were tolerated,  
but forced to live in separate enclaves,

good enough to provide the services they were skilled at,  
but not good enough to become part of the system.

When things like the Black Plague occurred, or economic times got tough,  
it became acceptable to vent their frustration and anger  
by blaming and purging the local Jewish community.

This, of course, reached its zenith following the first World War,  
when many struggled in postwar Germany.

It was easy for the Nazis to point to successful Jews  
as obviously conspiring against them,  
fueling the people's anger and frustration  
and making the unthinkable possible.

Yet in the midst of this system, this world order  
that necessitated people who were in the system,  
and those who were the potential scapegoats outside, enters Jesus Christ.

He offered a different system, a different world order which included all:  
the Samaritan, the Roman, the leper and the prostitute.

There was no one ineligible to be "in."

The kingdoms of this world depended on exclusion,  
his was based entirely on inclusion.

The scapegoats of this world are the exalted of his.

Unlike the self-centered focus of this realm,  
his realm was focused on the other.

What can you do for someone else

instead of what is someone else doing to me.

He taught a way of life in direct opposition to the accepted values of the world.

Honor was found in humility, wealth was found in charity.

The outcast had the seat of honor at his banquets,

while the proud and boastful weren't on the guestlist.

His kingdom offered hope and relief to those in the margins,

those who struggled on the lowest rungs of the ladder,

and those who couldn't even get a foot up on the ladder.

So it should be no surprise that his message of hope and equality

did not sit well with those who depended on "the system,"

the status quo that kept them favored over others

The system that relied on scapegoats to distract those less fortunate

from justly turning their frustrated attention

to those in charge of how things did, or didn't work.

True to form, they mocked and ridiculed him, made him an outcast, a criminal,

and to them, yet another distraction

to release the mob's violence and frustration on, a scapegoat.

But like that initial goat in Leviticus, he truly was blameless and innocent.

However, there was something unique about this holy sacrificial victim.

Death was not the end.

He didn't just quietly die and become myth.

His followers experienced him beyond the grave.

A whole, growing group of people

began to live into the life and realm he promoted,

at odds with the "system," the status quo.

They welcomed the outcasts, cared for the excluded.

They rightly put the blame on those who were in charge,

not on the helpless scapegoat victims

because their messiah, their king was the ultimate scapegoat.

Throughout history their different way has weaved itself into society's narrative,

caring for the poor, seeking justice for those the "system" would cast out,

becoming the beacons of hope they were created to be

by their savior, the one who has been there since the beginning.

Yet the kingdoms of this world linger on.

There is still a system that favors some at the expense of others,

a status quo that requires the diversion of scapegoats.

The allure of privilege maintains the system,

often even among those who seek the kingdom not of this world.

How much do we participate in maintaining that age-old status quo?

Scapegoats have not gone away in the last two thousand years.

I mentioned the antisemitism that permeated Western culture throughout history.

While I'm not minimizing the racism that still exists for Jews today,

we've found plenty of others to blame for our misfortune.

In this country,

we've scapegoated the African-Americans

descended from those we enslaved to do our work,

the Native Americans we largely stole the land we live on from,

the Chinese who built our railroads,

imprisoned Japanese Americans for their ancestry,

jailed LGBT people for who they love;

our history is full of scapegoats in this "Christian" country.

Sadly, it's just not in our past history.

Today we allow are fear and frustration

to ostracize those who flee to our shores

to escape danger in their own countries.

We blame them for our systems shortcomings.

We take their children and put them in camps.

The question we need to ask ourselves is which kingdom are we living into?

While it may be easy to say, "That's not me, I don't support that behavior;"

it's still taking place on your watch.

What are you doing about it?

Sadly, one of the worst things to happen to the Jesus movement

was becoming the official faith of "the system."

It's hard to buck the rules of the earthly realm

when you are part of it and benefit directly or indirectly from it.



In the next month as we enter into the promise and expectation  
of the new Way that Christmas brings,

let us reflect how we truly are living into that Way.

Let us think about how we participate in and benefit from this worldly realm,  
and what more we can do, as individuals,

and as the body whose head is the ruler of a realm

that represents a radical shift from the scapegoating norms

that still trudge on in this world.

I pray we find ways to represent his kingdom together in this world,

to those on the outside here and now, the scapegoats of today. Amen.