

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

I don't recall much about the Lent and Holy Week services in my home congregation in El Paso, IL, but I do recall what happened at the church in Batesville, AR. Often we would hear the Passion story all throughout Lent. At the time I thought it was cool. But the interesting thing was that it was not any particular passion account: it wasn't the Passion according to St. Luke as we just heard and participated in, or the Passion according to St. John that we will experience on Good Friday. No, the Passion that we heard, and it was taken right from the *Lutheran Worship Agenda*, was "The Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ Drawn from the Four Gospels." That is, someone took the four Gospel accounts and harmonized them chronologically into one seamless account—for we know that the Gospels all tell the crucifixion story with little differences.

For example, the Gospels record different words that Jesus spoke from the cross. Today we heard in the Gospel of St. Luke Jesus say to His executioners, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,*" and to one of the criminals crucified with Him, "*Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.*" But you don't hear those words in the other Gospels. In the Gospel of Matthew and in Mark, Jesus cried out, "*My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?*" In Luke, it's "*Father, into Your hands, I commit My Spirit,*" and in John, it's "*It is finished.*"

It's these nuances that you miss when you just read a harmonized Passion story — at least, I did. That's why I don't favor them so much any more. It's also why I was struck by my study of Luke's Passion account this week, especially chapter 23, for there's an emphasis found here that is not found in the other Gospels, and it can be summed up in the words of the centurion as Jesus breathed His last: "*Certainly this man was innocent!*"

Now I can understand how we might recoil in horror at such an injustice. Jesus, an innocent man, was sentenced to death, and Romans carried out that sentence: "*crucify him.*"

Jesus was innocent; it's all over Luke's account. Pilate, the governor having examined Him, "*said to the chief priests and the crowds, 'I find no guilt in this man.'*" He sent Him off to Herod — for Jesus was a Galilean. Herod examined Him, too — and mocked Him and treated Him with contempt, but sent Him back to Pilate. And Pilate reported again, "*after examining him before you, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us. Look, nothing deserving death has been done by him.*"

By now the whole crowd was worked up into a frenzy. They were calling for Jesus' blood: "*Crucify Him!*" Trying to get Jesus released, Pilate addressed the people a third time and "*said to them, "... I have found in him no guilt deserving death. I will therefore punish and release him.*" But the crowd was having none of that. They insisted that the innocent Jesus be crucified.

And so He was, but Luke is not done reminding us that Jesus was guiltless, He committed no crime, He was unstained by sin. Innocent Jesus was hanged from the tree of the cross with two criminals on either side of Him. As the crowd that was gathered around to gawk at the crucifixion spectacle began to mock the condemned, one of the criminals joined them in their mockery. But the other criminal rebuked him, saying "*Our punishment is just; we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.*"

And finally, again, Luke records the Roman centurion's testimony: "*Certainly this man was innocent!*"

But Luke does not make Jesus' defense to call our attention to the injustice that Jesus suffered. Rather, he sets Jesus' innocence before our eyes to remind us what price our ransom cost the Father: "*the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.*" Only a lamb without blemish could serve as the Passover lamb that rescued from bondage, and only the blood of the spotless Lamb of God, the innocent Jesus, would do to rescue all of mankind from the bondage to sin and the consequences of eternal death, for only this Lamb without blemish could bear "*the sin of many,*" — His innocence bore our sin — and only this spotless Lamb could make "*intercession for the transgressors,*" freeing us from the dread of guilt and condemnation and giving us a share in the fruit of His salvation.

It's not wrong to read a harmonized Passion account; we weren't sinning when we did that back then, or do it now. But it's enlightening to read the Passions from each Gospel writer's perspective. Today's account gives us — it gave me — a new insight into an emphasis for Luke: Jesus' innocence: Six times Luke records how Pilate, Herod, one of the criminals, and a centurion declare Jesus innocent. And that innocence now redounds to us. His righteousness is now ours; He bestows it by word and Supper, and He sends us forth to bestow it in His name in the preaching of repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

May we this week not get bogged down in the injustice of Christ's death — yes, He suffered the death we deserve, but remember He laid down His life of His own accord. Rather may we rejoice in the self-sacrifice of His innocent blood for the guilt of our sin.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.