

Didn't See That Coming (Matthew 16:21-28)

I'm one of those people who generally turns and walks in the other direction when some well-meaning soul starts talking about the "end times." Because, let's be honest, most popular end-times speculation sounds eerily similar to other conspiracy theories that emerge like a slime-covered creature from the fever swamps of Paranoiac Village ... only with more Jesus-y lingo. I have a difficult time taking seriously people who expend so much energy looking for signs of a world teetering on the edge of some sort of apocalyptic conflagration—like a sanctified Mad Max entering Thunderdome waving a Bible and a Jesus-fish.

But I've got to say, I mean, what with a former occupant of the White House and a whole "Who's Who" of former luminaries in his administration and on his campaign under multiple indictments, with insurrectionists finally going to jail for ... wait for it ... insurrection, with a climate crisis—with hurricanes and wildfires and rising ocean levels that feels like it might have already

reached critical mass ... all on the heels (perhaps still in the midst of?) a pandemic that has killed well over one million people in the U.S. and almost seven million worldwide—with all that going on, it feels a bit more hollow to dismiss those who think we’re living in the borderlands of the apocalypse.

It’s difficult not to believe **everything** is touched by politics right now.

In our passage for today, Jesus and his disciples are outside Caesarea Philippi—a city replete with the symbols of Roman imperial power. As we noted last week, this was the place King Herod chose to build a temple to honor Caesar Augustus—a city renamed Caesarea Philippi by Herod’s son, Philip, linking Philip with Caesar. It was **this** city that Philip made his **capital**, where he put his personal palace. It was a city where the Roman general Vespasian launched his military response to what Rome considered the “Jewish rebellion”—a conflict that resulted in the

destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish temple, just years before Matthew's writing of our Gospel text.

So, as I said last week, the setting for our passage this morning would have screamed "politics" to first-century readers of Matthew's Gospel.

If you recall, Jesus has just asked his disciples what the word on the street was about him. They yell out the names of famous prophets who've gotten sideways with the political kahunas: John the Baptist, Elijah, and Jeremiah.

Peter finally pipes up with the correct answer: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Jesus tells Peter that it's upon the foundation of this confession that Jesus will build a new *ekklesia*, unlike the Roman *ekklesia*—which was a political assembly where the will of the Roman Empire was made explicit and to which everybody was

compelled to listen. This new *ekklesia* Jesus announces, this new political assembly would make explicit the will of another realm—the realm of heaven—in which the powerful would no longer always be at the center of the community's life. In this new reign, the poor and the dispossessed, the vulnerable and the oppressed would take up their places of honor at the center of the community.

In our passage for this morning ... after explaining the political nature of this new community of followers, Jesus tells his disciples that there's one catch: He's going to be killed by the very rulers of the **old** *ekklesia*, the powerbrokers of the **old** empire, over which Rome ruled with an iron fist.

And the means of Jesus' death wouldn't just be any garden variety slip-and-fall, no succumbing to a bad case of dysentery or scurvy; it wouldn't even be a regular ol' state-sanctioned killing for getting caught committing doing something illegal; it would be a **political** execution ordered by the folks in charge. In the

shadow of King Philip's palace (Caesar's lapdog), Jesus tells his disciples that he's going to be crucified. And crucifixion, if you remember, was the most horrific form of punishment the Romans had managed to devise—a political assassination, a public spectacle meant to serve as a warning to anyone else who might harbor visions of rebelling against Rome and its representatives.

Peter, who'd just gotten an A in class for giving the correct answer, presses his luck—showing he didn't really understand the answer he'd just given: "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."

And Peter's confusion is understandable once you realize that being crucified wasn't something that—by definition—could **happen** to a **true** messiah. According to conventional wisdom, being crucified would have been *prima facie* evidence that Jesus **wasn't** the messiah.

“Crucified messiah” was an oxymoron like “God-fearing atheist” or “good driver from Ohio.”

But Jesus is adamant. He **knows** he’s going to get whacked by Big Brother. Which knowledge raises an interesting question: How does Jesus **know** he’s in line for a state-sponsored set of body piercings?

I mean, does Jesus have some kind of Sybil Trelawny “second sight” the rest of us **don’t** have access to? Does he use some sort of divine spoiler info, some top-secret cheat codes that the rest of humanity doesn’t get to see?

If so, then Jesus isn’t like **me** at all, is he?

If all Jesus has to do at any given moment is dial-up this mental jiu-jitsu none of the rest of us have, then he’s not, as the Hebrews writer says, a “high priest who has been tempted in every way as we are.”

But I suspect there's a much easier answer: Anytime you challenge Caesar, you're living on borrowed time. So, the fact that Jesus tells his disciples he's in confrontation with the powers and principalities that will end in his brutal death is no great magical feat of forecasting. Knowing which way the political winds are blowing is a pretty simple exercise.

No surprise here.

On June 12, 1963, Medgar Evers returned home after a meeting with attorneys from the NAACP. He was the first field secretary for the NAACP in Mississippi, working to organize boycotts and protests and to register black people to vote. Needless to say, Medgar Evers found himself the target of white hostility among those who sought to retain control of the politics and culture of a state with a bloody history of oppressing black people.

Medgar pulled into his driveway, got out of his car, and headed into the house to see his family. He was carrying NAACP t-shirts that read, “Jim Crow has got to Go.” But after exiting his car, he was shot in the back. His wife found him bleeding out on the concrete. A horrific tragedy beheld in living color by his wife and three children.

The story of Medgar Evers and his assassination remains one of the foundational stories of the Civil Rights movement—a story that prompted not only outrage but also emboldened the very African American population his assassination was meant to terrorize. His wife, Myrlie Evers-Williams, picked up that work, ultimately becoming the chairperson of the board of the national NAACP, continuing the struggle for which her husband died.

In an interview with National Public Radio, Farai Chideya asked Myrlie Evers-Williams how she had dealt with the fear that he might be hurt or killed in the days leading up to the assassination.

“I knew at some point, as he did, and we talked about it, that since he was the point person, he would be eliminated. We just didn’t know when or how.”

Chideya followed up by asking, “Do you **literally** mean that you **spoke** about this—that ‘one day I probably will die?’ Your husband **said** that to you?”

“Mm-hmm. But we **knew** that. We **knew** that from the day he accepted the job with the NAACP.”

Can you hear that? “We **knew** he was going to die?”

So, as David Lose has noted, “It’s no surprise that Jesus was killed. What’s surprising is that God raised Jesus from the dead. Resurrection reinforces—indeed, establishes—that Jesus’ life, love, and sacrifice are ultimately what will prevail.”

Standing just outside Caesarea Philippi, I suspect that another prediction that Jesus unveils is perhaps even **more** difficult for the disciples to wrap their heads around: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

I can imagine the disciples sneaking glances at one another and mouthing, “What the what? Did he just say **we’ve** got to die on crosses, **too**? This is definitely not where we thought the conversation was headed. I mean, it’s one thing for Jesus to find **himself** on the wrong side of a lynch mob; it’s another thing to drag **us** into it.”

The knowledge that their own deaths at the hands of the Roman Empire is the realization of a nightmare every Jewish kid in the first century carried around with them every day of their lives.

But in addition to coming to grips with the kind of death that pal-ling around with Jesus was likely to result in, there was the galling awareness that being candidates for Roman crucifixion meant you were part of an unsavory lot whose lives existed on the edges of society, immersed in the seamy underbelly of communal life.

On the other hand, being in this kind of company—the kind that no respectable first-century Palestinian parent wished for their child—is precisely where the empire of heaven dwells. It lives among those society has told everyone it's okay to ignore. So, Jesus not only wanders around indiscriminately, but where he sees the **heart** of the new creation, God is busy **revealing**.

Warren Carter observes: "On another level, it is a call to a life of marginalization, to identify with the nobodies like [the enslaved], foreigners, criminals, and those understood to be cursed by God. It is also to identify with those who resist the empire's control, who contest its version of reality, and who are vulnerable to its

reprisals. It is to identify with a sign of the empire's violent and humiliating attempt to dispose of all who threaten or challenge its interests."

But the thing is, as bad as Jesus' talk about crosses and laying down one's life sounds, there is still good news to be had. To identify with the cross and with the kind of people who are candidates for Rome's most severe and cruel form of capital punishment "is not to endorse the symbol but to counter and reframe its violence"; it is to see in crucifixion something even more profound: In embracing the cross, Jesus' followers can say of empire at its most blood-thirsty, "Is this the best you've got? God's got an even more astonishing trick up God's sleeve. It's a little something we call 'Easter.'"

Warren Carter writes, "As the end of the Gospel shows, (embracing the ignominy of crucifixion) is to identify with a sign that ironically indicates the empire's limits. ***The empire does its***

worst in crucifying Jesus. But God raised Jesus from death to thwart the empire's efforts and reveal its power's limits."

To lay down one's life and pick up a cross for Jesus is a counter-intuitive way of embracing the new empire God unleashes by bearing witness to the fact that the new empire arises as God's cosmic "No!" to every other realm that gains its strength from the blood and terror of the vulnerable.

It is "an act which refuses to give the elite the power of intimidation and conformity it craves."

In the current iteration of empire in which we live right now—in Washington, and Frankfort, and Louisville, in all the places where the knee of oppression crushes the necks of the marginalized—all kinds of people need us to embrace the life-giving—if painful and humiliating—reality that though empire deals in the death and suffering of those least able to protect themselves, it is ultimately on a collision course with God's new world—where those who

want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for Jesus' sake and the sake of that new world will find it.

The empires of this world always imperil Jesus and those who lay down their lives to follow him. No surprise there.

But the very fact that there are those willing to embrace the cross on behalf of the voiceless and the disinherited demonstrates the limits of the empire; it shows that the powers and principalities are never strong enough to thwart the commitment of peace, justice, and love of those who know that God is at work saying "Yes!" to everyone whose too often been subjected to the oppressive and lethal "No!" of the people in power.

And that's the biggest surprise of all time.

Nobody saw ***that*** coming.

—Amen