

Maundy Thursday: 2 April 2015

First United Methodist Church

Arlington, TX

“Are you, then, the Son of God?”

Preaching Text: Luke 22:66-71

In a 1941 volume of *Time* magazine there is a story that author Bill Bryson would later call a Ray Buduick story. On Sunday, 7 December 1941, Ray Buduick, who lived near Pearl Harbor, decided to take his private plane up for a spin as he often did. Unluckily for him, on this very morning the Japanese launched a surprise aerial assault on the United States. As Bryson wrote it: “As he headed out over Pearl Harbor and Manila Bay, Buduick was taken aback, to say the least, to find the western skies dark with Japanese Zeroes, all bearing down on him Miraculously he managed to land his plane safely in the midst of the greatest airborne attack yet seen in history, and lived to tell the tale, and in so doing became the first American to engage the Japanese in combat, however inadvertently” (Bill Bryson, *Made In America: An Informal History of the English Language in the United States*, Black Swan Press, 1994). You just never know.

One wonders if the disciples and others in and around Jerusalem on that first Maundy Thursday thought much about what that particular day might bring. Would it be simply another day or would it be a day that changed history? As it turns out Maundy Thursday is a day we still not only talk about, but also observe two millennia (2000 years) later. Maundy Thursday begins great violence against Jesus.

There is no doubt about it . . . we human beings live today in a violent world. We are not proud of the fact that our brothers/sisters kill one another in wars around the world, abuse their own children, and murder one another for possessions—such as a pair of tennis shoes for example. In African wars children kill children in places like Nigeria. Here in the United States, gang violence in some cities occurs to a degree that we really do not know what to do. We are at our wit’s end.

This week is Holy Week. As peculiar as it sounds, it was not only a holy week, but a week in which people did much violence to Jesus—the Prince of Peace. As Luke tells the story, when we arrive here at our text, Peter has denied Jesus in the courtyard three times. Then, those holding Jesus mocked and derided him. Our lesson tonight is Luke 22:66-71; Jesus before the council. Hear the reading:

66 When day came, the assembly of the elders of the people, both chief priests and scribes, gathered together, and they brought him to their council. 67 They said, “If you are the Messiah, tell us.” He replied, “If I tell you, you will not believe; 68 and if I question you, you will not answer. 69 But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God.” 70 All of them asked, “Are you, then, the Son of God?” He said to them, “You say that I am.” 71 Then they said, “What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips” (Luke 22:66-71).

Did you hear the question near the end of our reading: **“Are you, then, the Son of God?”** What a question to be asked if you were simply a person from Nazareth—a carpenter or a stone-mason, standing before priest and rulers and about to be dressed in mock royal regalia and hooted and jeered. Why would such a person as Jesus threaten the Sanhedrin or the mighty Roman Empire? Jesus’ intention is not to overthrow any government or overturn a religion as such. So they ask him: **“Are you, then, the Son of God?”** The question is asked of the very one who taught, “Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No;’ anything more than this comes from the evil one” (Matthew 5:37). Jesus hardly gives a yes or no to the question. By refusing to be drawn into the role of an offender on trial, Jesus repels imperial “justice.” Jesus’ refusal to defend himself (22:66-71; 23:3, 9) challenges both the ground and the appearance of the imperial justice system. The alliance of local leaders with Rome’s substitute king and governor could hardly be more obvious.

When we are confronted then with the question that the principalities and powers ask Jesus, **“Are you, then, the Son of God,”** it is left to us to decide the question. This is our question tonight and each night of Holy Week: Who do we say Jesus is? This week has the sense of decision about it. We make decisions all the time—and most are inconsequential. Yet from time to time some decisions are so vital that they live with us all our days. The decision about

who is Jesus stands as one of those decisions. We may think it does not matter, but occasionally a bad decision can either change or fail to change our lives—and, of course, that is the point.

For one example, John Sylvan didn't know what he had. Sylvan thought there was a market for a device that would brew a single cup of coffee at a time. After much experimentation, he came up with the device and the little plastic cup that would hold the coffee. He and his college roommate decided to name his invention using the Dutch word for excellence: Keurig.

In 2014, more than 9 billion of those little plastic cups were sold, generating more than \$4 billion of income, according to a recent issue of *The Atlantic*. However, Sylvan didn't receive any of that money; back in 1997, he sold his share of the company for \$50,000 (“What’s the healthiest way to keep everyone caffeinated?” James Hamblin, 2 Mar 2015).

Perhaps we need to think hard and pray hard about how we answer the question: Jesus—
“Are you, then, the Son of God?”