
Matthew's Passion in Homiletical Focus

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Holy Week priorities

Surely one of the oddest things about congregations that worship in liturgical traditions is their disagreement about how to enact the central worship services of Holy Week that run from Palm/Passion Sunday through Good Friday. Most other worship services by contrast evince a fair amount of consensus: Sunday morning services of word and Holy Communion are observed across much of the mainline landscape. Christmas Eve finds similar agreement: a service much like a Sunday morning but with enhanced focus on music, joy, and welcoming visitors. So, too, with Easter Day.

Yet when we turn to the worship rites of Holy Week, there is a variety that bespeaks disagreement, or perhaps confusion, about what those events are intended to accomplish. For some people and places, Palm Sunday is focused entirely on the triumphal entry into Jerusalem; for others, palms and procession function as preface to a reading of the Passion. For some, Maundy Thursday is mimetic in nature, seeking to reenact the events of the first Lord's supper: congregants gather for communion around a table in groups of twelve; bread replaces wafers; clay communion vessels replace silver; communities incorporate a Seder meal into their evening observances.¹ Others observe Maundy Thursday within the ordo of the Triduum, relishing the long Exodus reading of the Passover and the long Johannine reading with its emphasis on foot-washing and the new commandment. Good Friday is the opportunity for some communities to enter the darkness of Tenebrae, while other communities enter the light of John's account of the Passion.

My goal in this essay is not to weigh each and every one of these patterns and concerns. However, I do wish to make an argument that good Holy Week liturgy will create space for the Passion account as found in the synoptics generally and Matthew specifically, that it will notice how the synoptic Passion enriches the life of the community when given central place on Passion/Palm Sunday and when juxtaposed with John's account on Good Friday. To urge such attention to the Passion accounts requires me to put my cards on the table: I am an advocate for the Great

1. Thankfully, the Christian enactment of the Seder meal seems to be on the decline. More and more congregations are recognizing two central problems: first, such a meal is cultural and religious appropriation from a tradition which, to say the least, has already suffered enough at the hands of the church; second, such a meal is anachronistic, engaging in a set of rituals that developed well after the time of Jesus and his disciples.

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Three Days. I value the liturgical movement from palm procession to synoptic Passion account to final meal to the victorious cross of John's Gospel to the feast that is the Easter Vigil. These movements are liturgically complex and theologically coherent. By contrast, a Holy Week that eliminates the synoptic Passion or that blends various accounts at a single service blunts the liturgical and theological impact of what is enacted and experienced.

So, for example, Palm Sunday without an accompanying Passion story elevates to central place the procession into Jerusalem. This is a curious move because it asks the congregation to take up the role of the crowd, the very people who misunderstand why they are proclaiming Jesus as King. In other words, it encourages a celebration that is joyful for many of the wrong reasons. Indeed, it is not going too far to say that a straightforward embrace of Jesus as a king in procession enacts a theology of glory, placing the victory of the messiah somewhere other than the cross where God chooses to reveal it.

Similarly, Tenebrae services blunt the witness of any particular Passion account by conflating the four Gospels and by picking and choosing selected verses only. Such a blending encourages an eisegetical lens of our devising and places the emphasis on our emotional response to the sadness of the event, the dying of the light. There is, of course, a place for this response to the cross, but Good Friday is not it: to make Christ the object of our grief or pity is to miss the consistent witness of Scripture, that God took on flesh in order to save sinners from death and judgment, an action undertaken with the cross firmly in view.

Two Passion accounts are better than one

The truth is that decisions around these various services are often made in light of secondary concerns: the congregation likes Palm Sunday "the way it has always been;" the pastor and worship team

are looking for variety or change in order to encourage attendance at Holy Week services; the preacher is reluctant to prepare so many sermons. Further, taking the plunge into the Revised Common Lectionary's ordo for the Great Three Days takes some courage. Such a plunge, however, is facilitated when one central principle is granted: *each year the people of God ought to hear a Passion account from one of the synoptic gospels juxtaposed to the Passion account from John.*

This principle aligns the major events of Holy Week and Easter along exegetical and homiletical trajectories that are perennially fecund: the arrest and trial as humanity judging Christ is also perceived as God in Christ judging the world; the cross as abandonment or defeat is juxtaposed to the cross as victory and fulfillment; the resurrection as surprise reversal is also received as inevitable denouement. The principle also provides the hard-working preacher with endless opportunities to respond with joy to the stereophonic voice of Scripture rather than with anxiety at the need to pry from selected verses yet another original insight.

I encourage you, then, to come to Lent prepared to interact with the synoptic Passion account that is in the foreground based on the liturgical year. Ideally, this interaction would provide material for a full sermon on Passion/Palm Sunday and then also background or context for John's account on Good Friday; additionally, it would inform preaching throughout Holy Week and Easter.

What follows are five different clusters or emphases that emerge in Matthew's account of the Passion. They might fruitfully be employed in at least three different ways. First, they would make excellent resources for a Bible Study series, perhaps on the Sundays in or Wednesdays of Lent. A group could be encouraged to read the Passion in part or in full each week and then to interpret that same material through a different lens. What a gift it would be in a culture that focuses on literalist and fundamentalist hermeneutics for God's people to soak in chapters 26 and 27 of Matthew for a period of weeks, to see that Matthew's theological and literary concerns go far beyond the relatively uninteresting question, "Did it happen just like this?"

Second, these emphases could provide a set of readings for Lenten midweek worship. Each week a portion from Matthew's Passion would serve as the entrance into a Matthean emphasis. Again people would receive the gift of slowing down and receiving these texts in a richer way. Even more, they would be prepared for Passion/Palm Sunday. What a gift it would be to a preacher to have a significant portion of the congregation listening to Matthew's Passion as a familiar text, one with which they have recently interacted in a liturgical setting.

Finally, each of these emphases is appropriate as a locus for preaching on Palm/Passion Sunday. Though preaching helps and guides are notoriously ephemeral—almost as ephemeral as sermons themselves!—it seems safe to say that Matthew's theological and literary concerns are not going anywhere; once these loci have been identified, one may come back to them triennially as new ways of entering into the text.

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First emphasis—the abandoned Christ

This first emphasis is, in a sense, low-hanging fruit for the preacher inasmuch as it is essentially a borrowing from Mark's Passion account. Such borrowing is relatively easy to do because Matthew relies so heavily on Mark's basic structure and narrative pattern. Thus one of Matthew's foci is arguably the theological center of Mark's Passion account—the absolute abandonment of the Messiah.

In Mark the abandonment looks something like this: Jesus in conflict with the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders (11:27—12:12); Jesus in conflict with the Pharisees and the Herodians (12:13-17); Jesus in conflict with the Sadducees (12:18-27); the determination of the chief priests and scribes to find a way to kill Jesus (14:1-2); Judas colluding with the chief priests (14:10-11); betrayal and arrest (14:43-49); desertion by disciples (14:50); miscarriage of Jewish justice (14:53-65); triple denial by Peter (14:66-72); miscarriage of Roman justice (15:1-20); derision of crowd, chief priests, scribes, and bandits (15:29-32); abandonment by God (15:34-35); death (15:37). Mark's account reads like a narrative cone or funnel: the further in Jesus gets, the narrower the sides and the fewer the supporters. He dies utterly alone, bereft of the presence even of God: "Eloi, eloi, lema sabachthani."

While there is certainly material added to Matthew's account of Jesus' final week—in particular a large number of teachings, parables, and laments placed between Jesus' conflicts in the temple and the last supper—Matthew embraces the abandonment motif of Mark and maintains the basic order and chronology of the various abandonments. What is more, the nearer Matthew gets to the death of Jesus, the more closely he hews to Mark's telling of it and the less he adds original material.

All of this is immensely useful to the preacher or teacher. First, it offers a narrative spine on which to arrange other emphases. In contrast to some later generations, Matthew is an enthusiastic reader of Mark and an enthusiastic proponent of Mark's theology of the Passion. The Passion preacher then can draw people into the Passion story by emphasizing the relational aspect of it. For both Matthew and Mark, the worst elements of the trials and crucifixion are not the physical pain but the betrayal and abandonment of everyone.

Perhaps even more helpful is the way Matthew's use of Mark's narrative of abandonment allows preachers to focus on what they might otherwise be tempted to avoid: Jesus' cry of abandonment on the cross. Is there any other sentence in the gospels more likely to turn proclaimers of the good news into explainers of the text

than “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” How often preachers and pastors offer up some version of “This doesn’t mean what it clearly says.” Explanations that I have heard from pulpits tend to psychologize the verse (“This is how Jesus *felt* on the cross, but, of course, God never really abandoned him”), to contextualize it in a way that removes the sting (“You have to remember that Jesus was in great pain”), or to ask for a large literary leap of faith (“The psalm Jesus is quoting starts in despair but ends [thirty verses later!] in hope”).

As one preacher to another, I vote that we call all such explanations what they are: exegetical cowardice in the face of a hard text. The process of ever-increasing abandonment in Mark and Matthew makes it clear that this verse is not an aberration but the tragic climax of the crucifixion. Jews and Romans have abandoned him; so, too, have friends and enemies and strangers; his prayer in Gethsemane has gone unanswered; now he must endure this awful death entirely on his own. He will receive no special favors, no special attention, from the one he has called Abba. He must bear the curse—he must be the curse—all on his own.

God’s will and Christ’s willingness

A second aspect of Matthew’s Passion—perhaps the most prominent in terms of how Matthew reshapes Mark—is his emphasis on the working out of God’s will in the midst of, indeed through and in spite of, human machinations.² A full review of the Passion narrative is beyond the scope of this article, but a few highlighted scenes make clear what Matthew is doing.

When Jesus finishes the last major section of teachings (Matt 25), he offers a fourth prediction of his death, for the first time telling the disciples that it will occur on the Passover (26:2). The very next verse tells us that the chief priests and elders agree that Jesus will die, but “not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people” (26:5). The stage is set: the forces aligned against Jesus want him dead, but they do not realize that they are not in charge of the timetable. Nor, of course, do they realize that they are unwilling instruments in the hands of a God set on reconciliation through the cross.

When the time comes to prepare for the Passover meal, Jesus sends his disciples to “a certain man”—presumably someone already known to Jesus though perhaps not to his disciples—with the message that “My time is near; I will keep the Passover at your house” (26:18). Again, at the arrest, Matthew adds a verse not present in Mark: “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?” (26:53). In these moments and in many others, Matthew shows us a Jesus who is a willing participant in the working out of God’s mighty act of redemption. He may be abandoned, but he is not a passive victim. He is Immanuel, and as such he enacts God’s will in the world, especially at those times when humanity seems most firmly set to thwart him.

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One way to preach into Matthew’s understanding of God’s will in the Passion narrative is to remind the community that as siblings of Christ through the Spirit they too live a life that is broken but imbued with God’s will. Our lives do not become easier when we follow Christ—indeed, the opposite is more often the case—but they exist within the assurance that God is working out God’s will even in the midst of difficulties. A good sermon on this topic does not simply use Christ’s death as an opportunity to speak about our own troubles, but neither does it fail to make connections. Christ’s suffering fulfills God’s purposes; our willingness to follow the crucified messiah means that our discipleship also furthers God’s work in the world.

Perhaps another way to make this point is to say that the question of God’s will and humanity’s resistance is the theology of the cross in a Matthean key. God’s will is not found in Christ evading arrest or triumphing at trial or miraculously escaping the cross. On the contrary, God’s will is found in unlikely and even disturbing places: in Christ’s acquiescence at Gethsemane, in his calm acceptance of arrest, in his silence before Pilate and other accusers. This understanding could make a profound difference in the self-understanding and ministry of a congregation that takes it seriously. No longer is growth or financial robustness the measure of a successful congregation; indeed, the very idea of a congregation as a place for “success” is a contradiction in terms. Rather, people need to be preached into a faithfulness to God that does not look for validation from the defining stories and codes of the society around them.

It is probably also a good idea in this context to remind ourselves as preachers how not to use Matthew’s understanding of God’s will. Simply put, faith in God and God’s will ought not to lead to quietism or simple passivity. It does no good to point to the Passion of Jesus and infer that all suffering glorifies God and should be endured. The Christ who suffers so grievously is the same one who preaches the gospel, performs mighty deeds of power, and declares the kingdom of God is at hand. His suffering ought not to be understood as an end in itself; rather, he suffers confident that the will of God achieves God’s ends on behalf of others.

² Tom Long’s commentary is especially strong on this: *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 287–319.

God's judgment and the disciples' failure

Even the occasional worshipper or Gospel reader is likely to notice that Matthew emphasizes God's judgment to a degree and with a sharpness that separates him from the other Gospels. And as though to prepare us for the Passion account, chapter 25 contains some of the strictest parables in the Gospel: The Ten Bridesmaids, The Talents, and The Judgment of the Gentiles. In doing so, this chapter sets the stage for a Passion in which individuals, groups, and entire nations are called to realize how great the stakes are for them. For these parables make it clear—not everyone who starts out looking for the bridegroom attends the banquet; some who have received a gift from their master end up nonetheless in the outer darkness; and many who think they are among the sheep find they are in fact goats, would-be disciples who did not fulfill the love of neighbor and stranger. This is no Jesus meek and mild. Quite the contrary!

For contemporary mainline Christians at least, it is tempting to turn from judgment as a theme. Certainly, it is no fun to preach it—especially if those hearing it are people whom we love and who also pay our salary. However, we might be wise in Holy Week to realize that Matthew is giving us the gift of brutal honesty. When else is it more appropriate to be reminded that God is deathly serious about the work of salvation and that the church therefore is the expression of God's sovereign strivings to bring us out of death to life? People need to be reminded—I need to be reminded!—that our hopeful claim to be sheep and not goats rests in Christ's sacrifice on our behalf, that whatever oil or talents we have or hope to have need to find expression in a life of genuine discipleship.

If we make the brave decision to proclaim God's judgment in Matthew's Passion, then the disciples generally and Peter and Judas particularly provide us with ample material. The disciples fall short repeatedly of course, and Jesus' judgment of them is clear. He chastises them for not appreciating the woman who anoints him in Bethany. He announces a betrayer in their midst in such an ambiguous way that each man is forced to look into the murkiness of his own commitment to Jesus: they "began to say to him one after another, 'Surely not I, Lord?'" The inner circle cannot stay awake to pray at Gethsemane; all but Peter abandon him at the first sign of trouble. Certainly part of a sermon on judgment could point to the disciples and remind its listeners that not all judgments are the final judgment. It is possible to fall grievously short, even to abandon the Son of God in his hour of need, and yet return and be healed.

Such a reading still leaves Peter and Judas to consider. Matthew's account of Peter's role in the Passion is almost identical to Mark's. Of Judas, though, Matthew has much more to tell us, and his increased narrative prominence creates an implied juxtaposition with Peter. Matthew seems to be saying to us that these two men represent stories that are superficially similar but are, finally, as different as it is possible to be. As in the final parable of judgment in chapter 25, Peter and Judas are surprised at their status or standing before a just God: one turns out to be a sheep, the

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Mark does not mention Judas by name in attendance at the last supper; we might infer it, but the truth is that in Mark Judas disappears from the narrative between the moment he agrees to betray Jesus until he kisses Jesus in Gethsemane. Matthew, however, insists that Judas is present at the meal and that he is the last of the disciples to question Jesus: "Surely not I, Rabbi?" [Jesus] replied, "You have said so" (26:25). Jesus' reply reminds us yet again that everything—even the betrayal itself—takes place according to God's plan. Judas is included in the final meal as one of the designated twelve, but as Stanley Hauerwas adroitly points out, "Jesus insists that 'all of you' are to drink from the cup, making clear that Judas will also share the cup. Judas, however, drinks to his death, unable to join in the kingdom."³

Both Peter and Judas repent of their actions. Peter weeps bitterly at his denial of Jesus; Judas returns the money he has been given and declares, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood" (27:4). For Matthew, though, only one of them repents in a way that is efficacious. While Peter has proved no better than anyone else—while his denials place him alongside the others who abandon Jesus—he is not cast into the outer darkness. Judas, however, has placed himself beyond forgiveness. He agrees to betray Jesus, literally "to give him over" (*paradidomi*). By the time he repents, his betrayal is an accomplished fact: he has become "Judas, his betrayer" (27:3). Peter can proclaim Jesus and, as it were, undo his denial; betrayal, however, cannot be undone, especially when the one betrayed has been given over to death.

A sermon or class that juxtaposed these two figures might well be illuminating and even comforting. There is no question that justice and judgment are at work here; even more, though, one becomes aware of how far the mercy of God reaches. Yes, betraying the Son of Man is an offense against God from which there is no recovery; but that is not the situation in which we generally find ourselves as followers of Jesus. Rather, we find ourselves in situations like that of Peter: out of fear or embarrassment or uncertainty

3. Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 218.

we put our lights under a bushel basket; we do not proclaim our allegiance to Jesus. This is a serious failure to be sure, but Matthew's Passion makes it clear that it is not a final failure. Indeed, rescue from this failure will come—on the third day!

God's new world

A fourth emphasis that deserves to be preached is Matthew's claim that the Passion of Jesus accomplishes nothing less than creating a new world, that the resurrection forms a new people, the church, and they are central to God's designs even as they are marginal to earthly powers. It has long been recognized that the entire New Testament is written for marginal communities; Warren Carter, however, has in several commentaries made marginality and new creation central to his reading of Matthew. He translates *basilea tou theou* as "God's empire," thereby juxtaposing it with the Roman Empire. Thus, according to Carter, "Jesus is complicit in his own death...He is aware of the threatening impact of his proclamation and enactment of God's empire on his opponents, but maintains his faithfulness and resoluteness to God's justice and life-giving reign."⁴ This is an emphasis that is hard to pin down because it is, in a sense, ubiquitous. Carter is clearly aware of this: "Jesus' crucifixion in Jerusalem primarily results from proclaiming and embodying God's reign or empire. The life-giving and just power of God's empire conflicts with and challenges the hierarchical, exploitative, and oppressive practices of Rome's empire and the allied religious elite. Jesus dies because of his commitment to God's different world order, present and future."⁵ Thus one might point to Jesus' words at the last supper ("until the day I drink it new...") and before Caiaphas ("seated at the right hand of Power") as examples of God's new empire being made visible in Matthew's Passion. The ineffectiveness of the guards placed at the tomb also proclaim a resurrection reality that can be neither prevented nor hidden.

Most tellingly of all, this emphasis on a new empire—a new world—is manifested in the saints breaking out of the tombs immediately following Jesus' death. The passage is unique to Matthew and raises several questions. Is the unusual word "saint" proleptic for the Christian saints to come or simply a peculiar word choice denoting the righteous of Israel? If the saints rise from the tomb on Friday but go into Jerusalem only after the resurrection, are they left milling around the tombs for the better part of forty-eight hours? Is this a temporary resurrection—perhaps along the lines of Lazarus—or are these saints beyond death in the way that Jesus is? Matthew, of course, answers none of these questions. My suspicion is that he would find them impertinent or at least beside the point. His point in telling this story is that the death of Jesus immediately undercuts the finality of death and thus transforms its meaning. Traditional ways of asserting power and authority—like putting a political opponent to death—have lost their meaning in

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light of Christ's death and impending resurrection. God's empire has triumphed over the Roman Empire; indeed, God's empire has triumphed over all earthly understandings of empire itself.

Such an understanding of empire and new world order is tricky to preach, but it is also rewarding. It provides context for Matthew's emphasis on judgment: in the light of God's empire, the world is declared guilty in manifold ways, and communities and individuals are exhorted to commit themselves to discipleship in God's new reality. It also makes central the concerns and claims of the nascent church. Further, this understanding offers the opportunity to preach into the New Testament claim that death, though awful, has been defeated and is henceforth to be understood as a temporary state. Finally, it gives the preacher a fuller vocabulary for talking about the meaning of resurrection. In place of what is too often a fairly flat individualism—"Christ has defeated death; you too will be raised"—the new empire or world comes to rescue humanity as a whole. The proclamation is not, "Jesus has been raised, and he invites you to come along," but rather, "Jesus has been raised, and the world is now changed (whether you like it or not)."

No one but Matthew

A fifth emphasis might be thought of as a work of bricolage, drawing together a handful of fairly diverse texts. Though more might be added, there are five passages that are found in Matthew and not in Mark and which therefore may be considered distinctly Matthean. The five that I have in mind are (1) Jesus' claim at his arrest that he could call down twelve legions to protect him (26:53), (2) the death of Judas (27:3–10), (3) Pilate's wife's dream (27:19), (4) the cry of the crowd, "His blood be on us and on our children!" (27:25), and (5) the saints coming out of the tombs (27:52–54). They are not enough to constitute a full Matthean theology of the Passion; however, they do delineate emphases addressed in this article. As such, they provide the preacher with an opportunity to highlight what makes Matthew's Passion different from the others. A congregation that heard such a sermon on Passion/Palm Sunday would be well-situated on Good Friday to recognize how different John's Passion is in its focus and themes.

4. Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000), 498–499.

5. *Ibid.*, 498.

Jesus' arrest in Matthew evokes from him the assurance that God could send twelve legions to protect him. Commentaries rightly point out that such a statement reinforces Jesus' claim to be a heaven-sent king. Equally important is the way this verse emphasizes God's will at work through the willingness of Jesus. The same Jesus who has just prayed that God the Father might consider letting the cup pass him by now assures his disciples that God would heed an appeal for intervention and for vast heavenly protections.

The dream of Pilate's wife also points in the direction of the divine will at work. At one level it employs the trope that dreams are ways for the supernatural to break through into the mundane. After all, the central claim of this dream is a true one: Jesus is indeed an "innocent man." Further, the advice the dream offers is wise: "have nothing to do with" Jesus. The narrative invites us to ponder briefly what might have happened to Pilate if he had heeded her warning. Certainly, he would have avoided notoriety as the Roman responsible for crucifying Jesus. (As the Pilate of *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, sings, "Then I saw thousands of millions / Crying for this man / And then I heard them mentioning my name / And leaving me the blame.") Such a narrative supposal, though, is quickly overturned: Pilate ignores her advice, fulfilling God's intentions and timing. Indeed, Pilate will be proven a fool, for on the third day God vetoes Pilate's verdict, turning death into resurrection.

The death of Judas might be thought of as the intersection of two Matthean emphases: the will of God and the justice of God. First the story illustrates powerfully the way God's will works through apparent opposites. The point is not simply that Judas recognizes that he has made a mistake or that he is on the wrong side of history. Much more important is Matthew's assurance that Judas' death fulfills Scripture: "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one on whom a price had been set... and they gave them for a potter's field, as the Lord commanded me" (27:9–10). As is so often the case with Matthew, the point of the Old Testament fulfillment is not mere proof-texting but the assurance that God is at work through events apparently devoid of God's presence. Judas' death is also an example of the judgment and justice of God, of course. Judas dies prior to Jesus in Matthew's account. Having abandoned Jesus, he is now in turn abandoned by his collaborators, the chief priests and elders.

The fourth Matthean addition is also the most radioactive: Pilate's insistence that he is innocent of Jesus' blood and the reply of the crowd that they take responsibility for the action. This is a moment that has echoed down the centuries to the church's shame, and I blame no preacher who is tempted to avoid it entirely. However, preachers who can find a way to acknowledge the anti-Semitic use of the passage might also find themselves freed up to assert that this encounter reflects a fairly basic New Testament belief: the Roman Empire failed to recognize God's Son when he came, and Israel rejected him. Or, as John puts it, "the world did not know him... his own people did not accept him" (John 1:10–11). Such a claim can then serve as prelude to the deeper

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theological claim that the guilty party in Jesus' death is not in any simple sense the Roman Empire or the nation of Judah. No, the guilty party is humanity: Gentiles and Jews alike fail to respond to Immanuel. None of us have recognized him; all of us have his blood upon our conscience. The hymn has it right: "'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee. I crucified thee."

Finally, it is worth briefly revisiting the cracking open of the saints' tombs immediately following Jesus' death. My experience with these few verses is that most people in my congregation either make nothing of them at all—they are so bizarre and so brief that they slip by unnoticed—or they come to me quietly after worship and say, "What was that bit about the zombies?" In a sermon or class on uniquely Matthean passages, touching even briefly on Warren Carter's understanding of the marginalized and of God's empire enriches the meaning of both the crucifixion and the resurrection.

These five distinctly Matthean passages bear witness to much that Matthew has to say about the meaning of the Passion. Perhaps it is too much to imagine that all five can be addressed in a single sermon. Nonetheless, skilled preachers may use these passages to draw to the auditors' attention how much is at stake in Matthew. They might find that moving through Matthew's major emphases—from justice to God's will to new world—provides them with a homiletical arc that is at home in such places as a Lowry loop, Wilson's four-page sermon, and the law/gospel dialectic.

Final exhortation

There are as many ways to enter into Matthew's Passion as there are scholars and preachers and auditors of the text. I have highlighted five to make the point clear: there is no good reason to give short shrift to the synoptic Gospels during Holy Week. Their rich mix of overlapping themes and distinctive emphases is ample material for many lifetimes of preaching. As one of my New Testament mentors said to me, "Mark, if you ever get bored with the New Testament, it's your fault." His words strike me now as Matthean in tone—a hint of judgment, the acknowledgement that failure is possible, but mostly the promise that something new is happening in the proclamation of Jesus, something that is life-giving and life-sustaining. This, then, is my hope for you, fellow preacher: may you never get bored preaching Matthew's Passion.