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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

April 2, 2026

Good Friday, All Years, Revised Common Lectionary

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Psalm 22

Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9

John 18:1-19:42

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“Whom are you looking for?”

Last Sunday, as we began Holy Week, we heard the passion story from the Gospel according to Matthew. A raw story; a story of grief, as Jesus dies mocked and alone, his last words “My God, why have you forsaken me?”

Tonight we hear John’s version. The second-century saint Clement of Alexandria called John’s gospel a “spiritual gospel,” one that goes beyond the raw facts to illuminate the spiritual meaning. And in this passion story Jesus is not simply a victim. He is a king. But a king unlike any the world has seen.

“Whom are you looking for?” Those are the first words we spoke in our identification with Jesus tonight. On Sunday when we read Matthew’s version we played the part of the crowd. But tonight we take a different perspective, united with Jesus himself as he makes his great Passover through death.

He asks this question of the soldiers who come to arrest him. “Whom are you looking for?” And when they say “Jesus of Nazareth,” he replies, “I am he”—the last of all the great “I AM statements in John’s gospel”: I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world, moments when Jesus applies to himself the very name of God itself revealed to Moses: “I AM.” And when he says this, somehow, the very force of that revelation makes them all fall to the ground. Here is a king indeed. And here is a reversal. They hold the weapons, but he is in charge.

As the story continues John keeps telling us who Jesus is. What is a brutal state execution from the outside is a coronation in disguise on the inside. The purple robe and the crown of thorns, insignia meant for mockery but showing forth who this king really is. The inscription Pilate refuses to change as he ironically mocks not only this man but also the whole colonized people Pilate governs: “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” On the cross itself Jesus dies not with a cry of abandonment, “Why have you forsaken me,” but with a shout of triumphant completion: “It is finished!” And when he dies, he’s given a kingly burial, wrapped with an astonishing hundred pounds of spices and laid in a new-made tomb.

John, our spiritual gossamer, wants us to see: the cross is a cross, but it is also a throne. And the king who reigns from this throne rules by a completely different logic than the empire that’s executing him. Rome’s power, Pilate’s power, is the power of domination, coercion, violence. The power that exerts its will on the world by being the biggest and the most lethal and the most aggressive, by making its own law and taking what it wishes. And it is the power of cynicism: “What is truth?” Pilate asks. For him, perhaps, truth is what is convenient. He doesn’t know that Truth is the person standing before him.

We know the world of Rome's style of power well. We are living in it, as generation after generation in this fallen world has lived in it. But Jesus on the cross represents a completely different style of power. And it is power.

"When I am lifted up," Jesus says earlier in this gospel of John, "I will draw all to myself." Not compel; *draw*. The power of Jesus is the power of attraction, not coercion. The power of a self-giving love so beautiful, so captivating, that it draws people to it by its own gravity.

There's a little hymn in our hymnal that sets to a sweet, simple tune one of the very earliest Christian texts outside the New Testament, the Letter to Diognetus. "The great Creator of the worlds, the sovereign God of heaven, his holy and immortal Truth to us on earth has given."

"He sent him not in wrath and power, but grace and peace to bring: in kindness, as a king might send his Son, himself a king."

"He came as Savior to his own; the way of love he trod. He came to win us by good will, for force is not of God." *He came to win us by good will, for force is not of God.*

"Not to oppress, but summon all their truest life to find, in love God sent the Son to save, not to condemn mankind."

So today, who are we looking for? All of us have come to this darkened church, to this stark liturgy, looking for something. Maybe comfort. Maybe meaning. Maybe just to be present together in the sorrow and gravity of this awful, sacred day. What we find is a love stronger than force, stronger than brutality, stronger than death itself. Today he is lifted up on the cross, and he is drawing all to himself: all of us, all things, all.

“Whom are you looking for?” We will hear this question one more time. On Sunday morning, in a garden at dawn, addressed not to soldiers but to a woman in tears. But that is another day. Today we stay here, with the one who stayed here with us.