

CRUCIFIXION

(Mark 15:21-41)

The story of Jesus' crucifixion is a complex and multifaceted martyr story. The story describes a violent, unjust execution with emotional restraint. There are no maudlin details, such as can be heard regularly in retellings of this story. Nevertheless, the injustice and agony of Jesus' death are described in a manner that is unforgettable. The story sets our experiences of human captivity to the powers of sin and death in the context of this death.

The Story

And they compelled a passer-by, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross.
And they brought him to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull).

And they offered him wine mingled with myrrh.
But he did not take it.

And they crucified him, and divided his garments among them, casting lots for them, to decide what each should take.
And it was the third hour, when they crucified him.

And the inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews."
And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left.

And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads, and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days.
Save yourself, and come down from the cross!"

So also the chief priests mocked him to one another with the scribes, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself.
Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe."
Those who were crucified with him also reviled him.

And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.
And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"
Which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

And some of the bystanders hearing it said, "Look, he is calling Elijah."

And one ran and, filling a sponge full of vinegar, put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down."

But Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed his last.

And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.

And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that he thus breathed his last, he said, "Truly, this man was the Son of God!"

There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome, who, when he was in Galilee, followed him, and ministered to him, and also many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem.

Learning the Story

Verbal Threads

"Crucified." The crucifixion section of the story is linked by the verb "to crucify." Literally translated, the crucifixion verbal threads alternate between present and past tenses. "And they crucify him" (vs. 24); "Now it was the third hour and they crucified him" (vs. 25); "And with him they crucify" (vs. 27). This last verbal thread is picked up as the climax of the mocking episode: "those crucified with him" (vs. 32).

"Save yourself, and come down from the cross." The two parts of this mocking statement made by those who passed by are picked up and developed in the statement of the chief priests and scribes: "He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Christ ... come down now from the cross" (vss. 31-32a). This connection is the verbal component for the crescendo of mockery in this episode.

"A loud voice"/"cry." The episodes of the death story begin and end with the verbal thread of Jesus' cry. The cry of dereliction is introduced by the phrase literally rendered "Jesus cried out with a loud cry" (vs. 34). And the moment of death uses these same words: "Jesus, giving a loud cry" (vs. 37).

"Look, he is calling Elijah." The motif of the mockery and misunderstanding of Jesus' cry by those at the foot of the cross is introduced by this phrase. The verbal thread concludes with the statement of the one who gave him the sour wine, "Let us see whether Elijah will come" (vss. 35-36).

Listening to the Story

The preparation for the execution has two themes: the journey to Golgotha and the offer of the wine. The description of Simon of Cyrene (15:21) is highly personal. The naming of his sons, ("the father of Alexander and Rufus") implies that the narrator knows his family and thereby makes him a sympathetic character. The offer of the wine receives the greatest emphasis because of the shortness of the sentences. This offer is verbally connected with the last supper. Thus, a more literal translation of this verbal thread from the Greek is as follows:

And ... *taking* bread ... he *gave* it to them and said, "*Take it.*" And *taking* a cup... he *gave* it to them. (14:22-23)

And they *gave* him wine mingled with myrrh; but he did not *take* it. (15:23)

This connection contrasts sharing bread and wine at the Passover meal with the offer of wine at the crucifixion. The linkage with the last supper also answers the question implicit in Jesus' refusal of the wine: why didn't he take it? The conclusion to the supper was Jesus' vow of abstinence from wine. His refusal is, therefore, tied to his vow. Jesus keeps his vow of abstinence at the cost of even greater pain (15:23).

The description of the crucifixion focuses first on Jesus' garments. It is linked to the end of the mocking by the soldiers. The Greek text here can be translated "after they had finished mocking him, they put his own garments *back* on him" (Mark 15:20). In the crucifixion, they divided "his garments." The storyteller thereby implies that, once again, they stripped him naked. There was no greater shame in Israel.

This description of the dividing of his garments is in turn a quotation of Psalm 22: 19 (Ps. 21 in the Greek Septuagint). The following translation makes clear this connection in the Greek texts:

They divided my garments among themselves and upon my garment they cast lots. (Ps. 22:19)

They divided his garments casting lots on them to see who would take what. (Mark 15:24)

Psalm 22 is a lament. This reference indicates the emotional tone in which the story was told.

The reports of the time of the crucifixion and the inscription of the charge (vss. 25-26) are narrative comments. The storyteller interrupts the story to give the listeners these pieces of background information. Mark reports the crucifixion twice, each time in a different tense. As was noted above, in the Greek the first description is in the present tense-"and they crucify him"-while the second is in the aorist or past tense-"Now it was the third hour and they crucified him." The crucifixion is thus reported from two perspectives. The first time the narrator is an eyewitness who describes the crucifixion as it takes place, now. We are there. In the second report, the storyteller stops the story and speaks directly to his listeners in the present moment of the telling of the story. This is a retrospective account from the perspective of a person years later looking back on the event.

While we cannot hear how Mark said these words, the text suggests that they were spoken with some combination of horror, grief, irony, and disbelief. Repetitions are only made in biblical narrative in order to build a climax and to express a full range of emotions. Thus, the first description expresses the horror of watching the crucifixion happen, now. The second conveys the narrator's own disbelief and grief at what is happening. The second is shorter and, therefore, more deliberate and emotionally expressive. And, as with all narrative comments, the storyteller takes time to look directly at his listeners and to share with them.

The descriptions of the charge against Jesus and of his crucifixion with "robbers" are bitterly ironic (15:26). The title "King of the Jews" was only used by the chief priests in the trial before Pilate and by the Roman soldiers during the mocking inside the praetorium. To the high priest's question, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" Jesus responded positively, "I am" (14:61-62). By contrast, his response to Pilate's question, "Are you the King of the Jews?" was an equivocation: "You say it" (15:2). In Mark's story, Jesus never claims to be king. The implication is that this political charge was trumped up in order to get him condemned. And the fact that it is used by the Roman soldiers increases the irony. All of this indicates the tone in which the description of the charge was reported by the ancient narrator. The charge was unjust. Jesus was innocent. The tone was outrage, bitter irony.

The climax of the irony is that he was crucified with two "robbers," on his right and his left. In the original Greek, the storyteller goes back to the present tense of the eyewitness after his comments to the listeners: "And with him, they crucify ... " (15:27). The Greek word here, usually translated "robbers" (*lastas*), was often used to describe "brigands" or "political bandits," and particularly the Jewish revolutionaries who led the revolt against the Romans in A.D. 66-70. In Mark's context, during or shortly after the war, the connection of this term with the revolutionaries would have been current. Furthermore, the phrase "on the right and the left" has been used earlier in the story by James and John when they requested positions of power (10:37,40). The irony is that those who are crucified on Jesus' right and left are not his friends reigning with him but revolutionaries dying with him. In Jesus' case, to be executed in association with a revolution that he implicitly opposed was supremely ironic.

The culmination of this crescendo of irony is the mocking of Jesus on the cross (15:29-32). Prior to this, Jesus has been mocked by the enemies of Israel, the Romans. But now he is mocked by the people, the most respected leaders of the nation, and even by those who are crucified with him. The irony is experienced most fully against the background of the Jewish martyr stories, such as the story in II Maccabees of the seven boys. The boys supported each other. As they died, they encouraged one another.

The "wagging" of the head indicates the gesture of the storyteller as he describes those who passed by the cross. It is a further allusion to Psalm 22: "All who see me mock at me, they make mouths at me, they wag their heads (vs. 7). In the tradition of Israel, wagging the head is a sign of scorn and derision (Sir. 12:18; 13:7; Job 16:4). Once again, as with the inscription, the mockers refer to a charge against Jesus that has been shown to be false. This false charge was brought by the false witnesses at Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin:

And some stood up and bore false witness against him, saying, "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.'" (14:57-58)

The words of the mockers at the cross are "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days" (15:2, 9). The implication is that they are condemning him for the charge brought against him at the trial, a charge that the storyteller has already made clear is a false charge.

The chief priests and scribes pick up and elaborate the themes of the mockers passing by. They refer back to the other titles for which Jesus was condemned in the two trials: "the Christ" (14:61) and "the King of the Jews" (15:2, 9). The second title is slightly modified to "the King of Israel" (vs. 33). From the narrator's point of view, the chief priests and scribes, the most respected leaders of Israel, here commit what can only be called blasphemy. They slander and mock the Lord's Messiah.

The final culmination of this litany of mockery is that Jesus is reviled by the men who are crucified with him. From the leaders to the bandits, representatives of the entire nation mock Jesus. In fact, the mockery by the people of Israel is both more violent and receives more emphasis in the narrative than the mockery and humiliation of Jesus by the Gentile Roman soldiers.

The problem in telling this story is that contemporary Christian storytellers tend to tell or read this story with an attitude of hostility and judgment toward Jews. The effect of the telling of the stories is often to place the blame for Jesus' death on them, as if they were the enemy.

In order to hear this story in its original context, it needs to be heard in relation to the stories of other prophet martyrs in the tradition of Israel. The story of the martyrdom of Isaiah

is the most illuminating. This story was probably written during the Maccabean period approximately two hundred years before Mark. I would suggest that you read it aloud:

And while Isaiah was being sawed in half, his accuser, Belkira, stood by, and all the false prophets stood by, laughing and (maliciously) joyful because of Isaiah. And Belkira through Mekembekus, stood before Isaiah, laughing and deriding. And Belkira said to Isaiah, "Say, 'I have lied in everything I have spoken; the ways of Manasseh are good and right, and also the ways Belkira and those who are with him are good.'" And he said this to him when he began to be sawed in half.

And Isaiah was in a vision of the Lord, but his eyes were open, and he saw them. And Belkira spoke thus to Isaiah, "Say what I say to you, and I will turn their heart and make Manasseh, and the princes of Judah, and the people, and all Jerusalem worship you." And Isaiah answered and said, "If it is within my power to say, 'Condemned and cursed be you, and all your hosts and all your house!' For there is nothing further that you can take except the skin of my body."

And they seized Isaiah the son of Amoz and sawed him in half with a wood saw. And Manasseh, and Belkira, and the false prophets, and the princes, and the people, and all stood by looking on. And to the prophets who were with him he said before he was sawed in half, "Go to the district of Tyre and Sidon, because for me alone the Lord has mixed the cup." And while Isaiah was being sawed in half, he did not cry out, or weep, but his mouth spoke with the Holy Spirit until he was sawed in two. (Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah 5:1-14)

As can be heard in reading this story, the storyteller is first of all asking the listeners to sympathize with and revere Isaiah as a true prophet of Israel. But the narrator also asks them to recognize the great wrong that was done by Belkira, Manasseh, the false prophets, and the people. The story appeals to the listeners to change their minds in relation to Isaiah and the issues for which he died. It also implicitly asks the listeners to separate themselves from Belkira and Manasseh and the positions they represented. Thus, both the storyteller and the audience are assumed to be Jews. This is Jewish polemic against other Jewish groups.

The same dynamics are present in this episode of the story of Jesus' death. The shock of the story is that the people and the leaders of our religion treat Jesus in this manner. Clearly the storyteller's attitude is highly critical of the chief priests, the scribes, and the people. But the storyteller's attitude is not anti-Jewish. Rather it is a response to the conflict between various Jewish groups. Jesus, his disciples, and those who responded to him were also Jews. Just as in the martyrdom of Isaiah, the story appeals for a highly polarized response of sympathy for Jesus and alienation from other Jews, particularly the chief priests and scribes, who revile him.

The storyteller asks the listeners to recognize our corporate involvement in Jesus' death. The crowd was the decisive factor in the reversal of Pilate's offer to release Jesus to his decision to crucify him: "Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd ... "(15:15). In contrast to the Maccabean martyrs who were arrested and tried at the initiative of the Gentiles, Jesus is arrested and handed over to the Gentiles at the initiative of the leaders of Israel. All of the representatives of Israel in the story, from the religious leaders to the people to the condemned criminals, support Jesus' execution and contribute to his derision. That is, Mark appeals to his listeners to recognize that we were involved in the death of the Messiah.

The painful irony of Jesus' crucifixion by an alliance between his enemies and his own people is heightened by his cry. It comes at the end of three hours of darkness. The tone of the sentence is dark and foreboding. Once again, the instructions about how the story is to be told are built into the story itself: "with a loud voice" (15:34). Jesus' cry is a recitation of the first line of Psalm 22: " 'Eloi, Eloi lama sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' " The implication is that Jesus sang this lament of David. It is probable, therefore, that it was also sung as a lament by the storyteller.

Psalm 22 is the song of a righteous sufferer who expresses to God his feeling of having been abandoned by God. Singing this song did not mean that Jesus had lost faith in

God. The psalm is a prayer in which the psalmist first expresses the feelings associated with extreme pain, then describes the horror of his situation, and finally promises to praise God in the congregation upon his recovery. Thus, Jesus recites a traditional prayer of a righteous Jew who is near death.

The episode ends with the storyteller's translation of the prayer from Aramaic into Greek. Again, the narrator directly addresses his listeners. The effect of this repetition of Jesus' words is similar to the two descriptions of the crucifixion (15:24-25). The first makes present the event as it actually happened in the past, through the chanting of Jesus' words. The translation is given in the context of the storyteller's present relationship with his audience.

The bystanders misunderstand Jesus' words. The words *Eloi* and *Elijah* have similar sounds, particularly in Aramaic. In popular Jewish legend, Elijah was expected to come to the rescue of the godly in time of need. And, just as people laugh at legendary superstitions such as Santa Claus now, the implication is that these bystanders either deliberately misconstrued Jesus' cry or laughed at what they perceived to be his last-ditch appeal to naïve belief.

The final blow of humiliation and undeserved mockery is the offering of the sour wine (or vinegar). The gesture of this one bystander appears, at first, to be a gesture of kindness. Thirst was a major cause of death by crucifixion. But his words make clear his motivation. A little sour wine might keep Jesus alive a little longer. They don't expect Elijah but they can prolong the mocking. The offer of the wine is only a way to continue their fun. What appears at first to be a sympathetic gesture turns out to be the final twist of disdain. The sentence that describes Jesus' death is introduced by the phrase "But Jesus." This adversative conjunction implies that Jesus did not drink the sour wine but kept his vow of abstinence to the end. His response to this final act of spite against him is to cry out and die.

The final episode reports three responses to Jesus' death – by God, the centurion, and the women. God's response is the rending of the curtain of the Temple. In the telling of the story, this is a response of grief. The implied gesture is the rending of the garments. This action by God is the first sympathetic response to Jesus' suffering since the carrying of his cross by Simon of Cyrene. God had not forsaken Jesus.

The centurion's response is, first of all, respect and honor. His words are introduced by a description of his perspective "opposite" Jesus. The introduction is a time in the story in which the listeners can look at the cross from the centurion's point of view. His statement is an even more graphic reversal of expectations than that of the one who offered Jesus the sour wine. The expectation is that he will be hostile and mock Jesus. That is the pattern of Roman response to Jesus that has been established in the Pilate trial and the mockery by the soldiers. His words are then a surprise. This Gentile executioner even uses the title "Son of God," which has been used extensively earlier in the story (Mark 1:11; 3:11; 5:7; 9:7).

The climax of the episode is the description of the women who were watching (15:40-41). It is a long narrative comment that describes the relationship between these women and Jesus. The list of the three names is long. Only the names associated with one of the women, "Mary the mother of James the younger and loses," have been used earlier in the narrative. In the story of Jesus' rejection at Nazareth, the Nazarenes say, "Isn't this ... the son of Mary and brother of James and loses and Judas and Simon?" (Mark 6:3). These are the only instances of these names prior to this description. The verbal thread, therefore, implies that this woman was Jesus' mother. The phrase "James, the younger" is an abbreviation of "James, the younger brother." The threads, traced back through the narrative tapestry, are subtly interwoven with this earlier story of Jesus in Nazareth and with the story of the seven

brothers and their mother in the Maccabean tradition. But, for anyone who knew those stories, the connections were unmistakable.

Thus, the storyteller, with his characteristic indirectness, describes the women who mourned for Jesus as he died. Their grief and mourning is only implied. The climax of the story of Jesus' death is the description of these three women to whom he was close and a group of other women who had traveled to Jerusalem with him.

Connections

The primal connections of our experience with this story are experiences of consciousness and confession of personal and corporate sinfulness and experiences of abandonment in suffering and death. These correspond to primary dimensions of Jesus' role in this story. On the cross, Jesus, the Christ, suffers the results of our personal and corporate actions of sinful rebellion and hostility toward God. But Jesus is also a human being on the cross, who experiences the suffering of all of humanity and who, in the midst of that suffering, feels abandoned by God. In prayer, group discussion, and corporate worship, these connections with the story of Jesus' crucifixion and death can be explored as a means of discerning the intersections of our stories with God's story.

The foremost connection with this story is awareness of human captivity to the powers of sin and death. The season of Lent, the observance of Holy Week and especially of Good Friday, the stations of the cross, and the last meditations of the family rosary are Christian traditions that have enabled men and women to explore these connections with the story. The awareness of our personal responsibility for Jesus' suffering and death has led to the examination of conscience and to repentance. The sense of guilt and grief that is often an aspect of these meditations continues the spirit that is present in the story itself. These are then appropriate connections with this memory.

However, our traditions of meditation on Jesus' death have often centered almost exclusively on the awareness of personal sin. The story, on the other hand, concentrates on the sinfulness of human communities, such as the nation and the religion. While the failure of the disciples and Peter is a principal motif in the story, the crucifixion story focuses on the hostile actions of the crowd, the soldiers, and the religious leaders as groups in Jesus' death. The story appeals to its listeners to recognize our involvement with the atrocities of these groups against Jesus.

The story invites us, therefore, to explore the relationships between our involvement with corporate powers of sin and death and this narrative of human rebellion and hostility toward Jesus Christ. A way of opening ourselves to this dimension of the tradition is to identify the ways in which the groups with which we are identified are involved in sin against God and other people. That is, the story invites us to meditate on our involvement in the forces that cause war, racial oppression, starvation, sexual abuse, and poverty. A way of listening for these connections is to identify-in prayer, with another person, or in corporate worship-a communal situation in which you are involved and then to listen to the account of Jesus' crucifixion and death in that context. In contrast to the sense of despair and helplessness that meditation on these cosmic powers so often produces, the story itself may guide us to an appropriate awareness of both our particular involvement and our potential for change.

One of the most graphic stories I have ever heard that connects with this dimension of the crucifixion story was told by a Jewish woman at a predominantly Christian gathering. As I remember the event, she read a document that was discovered in Latvia after World War II.

It was written by a young boy. I will recount this story on the basis of notes I took while it was being read.

On the eve of Rosh Hashanna in 1941, the entire Jewish community of our town was gathered together and we were all confined to the synagogue without water, food, or relief for forty-eight hours. They brought lunatics from the asylum to guard us. The week before our rabbi had addressed our congregation and told us that imminent destruction was present for all of us and argued that we should fight, that we would indeed die, but that we would die with honor. The community took a vote and the majority of the community refused. And so we waited.

After those two days, we were led out of town; the rabbi led us. We were taken in groups of about 250 out to the Jewish cemetery past the edge of town. There, we were all made to take off our clothes, and to line up along a ditch that they had dug. Then one by one they shot each of us in the back of the neck. I was standing beside my father, and he was holding me by the hand. I timed the shots and listened to the rhythm of it.

When they came to me, at the instant when the shot went off I fell into the trench and it went over my head. Then one by one the others fell on top of me, my father and my uncle. The shooting went on for hours and more and more people fell on top of me until I was afraid I was going to suffocate. Finally, after many hours, the shooting stopped. They threw some dirt over the bodies and they went away.

After some hours, I managed to get out. Naked, cold, and covered with blood, I went to some homes that were nearby on the edge of the village along the road out to the cemetery. These were homes of Christians and I hoped that one of them would save me. I knocked on the first door and a peasant came to the door and looked at me and said, "You're a Jew. Go back to the grave where you belong."

I went on to the next house, knocked on the door and again, Christians came to the door. I pleaded with them, but they said, "Go back to your people, Jew. Join them. Stay with them." I went to all those doors and none of them would help me.

Finally, I remembered a widow who lived nearby whom I had known slightly, and I thought "Surely she will help me; she is a good Christian woman." And I went to the home of the widow and knocked on the door. She looked at me and she said, "I know you. You are one of the Jews. Go to the Jews. Go to the grave with your people." I begged her. She said, "Go to your own people. No one will help you here."

I went away and in a short time came back to the house, and knocked again. This time I said, "I am not who you thought. I am Jesus Christ, who has come back. I am broken, bleeding, and I need your help. I have come to you." She fell at my feet. She wiped my feet and begged me to come in. She cleaned me up, put clothes on me and fed me. I said, "You must say nothing about my visit to anyone for it is only to you that I have come." She gave me food, clothes, and after I had rested, I went over again how I had come only to her and that she was to say nothing. Then I went out into the forest and joined the partisans and organized what became the Jewish resistance in Latvia.

In listening to this story against the background of the story of Jesus' death, the appropriateness of its dynamics is crystal clear. Christian anti-Semitism was a part of the forces that led to this particular event and to the Holocaust. Confession, grief, and repentance are an appropriate response for Christians to this story. The person who read this document to

us appealed to us as Christians to recognize Christian involvement in the Holocaust. In a similar manner, Mark told the story of Jesus' crucifixion as an appeal for both Jews and Gentiles to recognize their involvement in Jesus' death. That is, there are profound connections between the dynamics of these two stories. Hearing the story of this survivor of the Holocaust may help us to understand some of the impact of the story of Jesus' crucifixion and death in its original context. So also, Jesus' story may shed light on the meaning of the Holocaust.

The other primal connection with this story is with Jesus as a human being who suffers as we do. There is a deep congruence between Jesus' feeling of being abandoned by God on the cross and our experience of suffering and death. Part of the power of this story is that Jesus, as both a human being and as God, experienced the most extreme suffering and humiliation in his death. For every person who experiences extreme suffering and humiliation, this story is a potential place of profound intersection with God's story.

The most accurate way that I can describe my understanding of this connection is to tell you a story from my own experience. Telling about the gift of this story to me in a time of crisis may help to clarify the ways in which God may be present to others through this story.

As I have recounted earlier, in early November of 1974, November ninth to be exact, I was hit by a car in a service station on the Bronx River Parkway in New York. I had been standing in back of a car waiting to speak to the attendant when another car came off the parkway and was unable to stop. Both of my legs and knees were fractured. Two inches of my right leg were smashed and my knee was punctured from the back through to the front.

Because of the danger of infection, I was given heavy antibiotics, which saved my legs. But by Thanksgiving, almost three weeks later, I had developed colitis and was able to take only fluids. My roommate, who had supported me during those weeks, had left the day before. Friends and family had come to the hospital that day. But they were at home eating together and I was in the hospital.

That night, I became very depressed. I watched a football game in the evening and realized I would never play again-not just football but any sports. And then I watched a war movie. That was even more depressing. I felt totally overwhelmed by the powers of darkness and death. About 2:00 in the morning, the pain became very severe. When I rang the bell for a pain shot, the night nurse refused to come. The battle of the bell went on and on. By 3:30 I was so depressed and the pain was so severe, I wanted to die. For the first time in my life, I wished I could die. I was all alone; the door was closed. And I began to yell as loud as I could in total frustration: "Why? Why have you let this happen to me? My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why have you left me alone like this? Why?"

When I realized what I was saying, I found myself remembering the story and just going on with the words. It was not at all difficult for me to identify those who were standing there at the foot of the cross. My nurse fit right into that role! I could see her laughing at me: "Let's see who will come and give him a pain shot!" I went over and over the story in my mind: the crucifixion, the mockery, the darkness and the cry, his death, and those who were watching. And the more I told it, the less I was alone. I had a companion who understood what I was going through, who had suffered for me.

And, when I thought about my situation in relation to Jesus' situation, it became clear that I was in pretty good shape. I started doing a detailed comparison of my condition with his: "This nurse is a rat but eventually she is going to come; Jesus had no one to give him a pain shot. I am in a bed; he was on a cross. I am in pain; he was in pain. But he was dying; I am not going to die. He was publicly exposed; I am in a hospital bed and people are caring for me. He was ridiculed and mocked by everyone; this nurse is taunting me but I have a lot

of wonderful nurses who care for me and respect me. I am here because of a stupid accident; he chose to be there so that I would know God is with me. He chose to be there for me so that I would never be alone, no matter how bad it gets."

And the more I remembered, the more my situation improved. I had a comrade in suffering. I was no longer alone. Remembering the story was the means by which Jesus Christ was present with me in that hour of depression and pain. It transformed the context in which I experienced the pain. And it was the turning point in my recovery. I stopped being an innocent victim who felt like I was being attacked by God and became a responsible agent in my own recovery. I started thinking about the resurrection possibilities in my situation, about the ways that God might be able to make something good out of this mess.

In a direct sense, this experience was the beginning of this book and of the recovery of biblical storytelling. I had been performing the stories and people had found them entertaining. But it changed no one's life. As I reflected on this experience, it became clear why. Only those things that I had internalized were available to me in the times of deepest stress. I needed to find a way to enable others to internalize the stories deeply. In a unique way, God can be present through the stories, the psalms, and the prayers that become a part of our interior selves. This realization was the beginning of the search to make the stories available to others, of which this book is an integral part.

Telling the Story

The story of Jesus' death is told in the life of the Church each Holy Week, in particular on Good Friday. These recitals are a steady reinforcement of our communal memory. Furthermore, each time that we celebrate the Eucharist we remember Christ's death. The telling of this story can happen in many different personal and community contexts. But most people never learn the stories so that they can tell them either to themselves or to others. There are a variety of ways in which this can be encouraged.

The following story describes one way in which the liturgical recital of the passion narrative can become an important dimension of a community's life. Richard Rice, presently the director of the Methodist City Society in New York, is the teller of this tale. When he was a pastor in Brooklyn, he found that enabling the men and Women of his congregation to tell the passion/resurrection narrative was both a meaningful lay education experience and an enrichment of Lenten worship. This is the story of their experience:

Our group began meeting about eight weeks before Easter. After the first meetings, we agreed that one person in the group would learn the story and tell it in worship for the Scripture lesson each week during Lent. This became a primary focus of the group's life as we helped each person get ready to tell the story the next week and then celebrated their victory in actually doing it.

The response of the congregation to the telling of the stories was extremely positive, which provided a high degree of incentive for the group. People were excited to see other lay persons telling the stories from memory. They also found the lessons more alive which in turn helped my preaching. About halfway through Lent, I realized that the group was also learning a great deal about the passion and resurrection narrative in Mark. But the success of this as a biblical study group was almost incidental to the contribution the group was making to the worship services of the congregation.

Sometime around the middle of Lent, I proposed to the group that we would tell the entire passion narrative for the Good Friday service. At first, people were reluctant and thoroughly frightened. But when I made it clear that they would only have to tell the stories they had already learned and I would do the rest, they were finally more than willing to do it.

On Good Friday, we rearranged the pews so that the congregation was gathered around us in a rough semi-circle with the group seated on a bench facing them. We began by singing two passion hymns and then we simply told the story. There were two other hymns during the telling of the story. As the story progressed, the

congregation became more and more deeply involved. By the end there was a primary sense of the holiness and the reality of Jesus' death. It was the most meaningful Good Friday service we have ever had. The people were so appreciative and asked that we tell the story every year.

This experience has made me aware of the power of the story when it is simply told. No sermon could have been more powerful than that story. And the people who told the story have become far more committed leaders in the life of the congregation. Telling the story changed them. It is clear to me that telling the biblical stories introduces a whole new element of meaning that has simply not been present before in the way we have used the Scriptures.