

## ***Gambling Beneath the Cross***

Trinity CRC, April 7, 2023

Good Friday

**John 19:24**

Rev. Richard J. deLange

People of God,

Author Dusty Hoffman pictures the Good Friday story this way: “Right on schedule, a group of men show up for work: jocks, tough, buff, competitive. As co-workers they began that day with the usual joking and razzing of one another. Though they made fun of each other, there was a bond between them from hours spent together.”

“Their job, however, was not what you'd call average. Daily these men would deal with nails, wood, spears, whips... and blood [lots of blood]. They are soldiers. Soldiers in the most powerful regime in the history of the world [to that point]. Well trained, focused, hardened. And on this day, the task was clear: Kill the man named Jesus who claims to be God.”

Killing is their business. They have grown callous to the job. And in every job people tend to look for ways to have a little fun. These soldiers are no different but because they are so hardened, their idea of fun can be enormously skewed. After Pilate had Jesus flogged, John tells us,

*Jn 19:2 The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe <sup>3</sup> and went up to him again and again, saying, "Hail, king of the Jews!" And they struck him in the face.*

To them, Jesus was just another low-life criminal, so they had no qualms about making fun of him. If this guy claims to be a king, let's give him a crown—a crown of thorns—to add a little more pain to his royal head! They'd already whipped his back side to a pulp so a few thorns in the head and a couple of slaps to the face are no big deal.

These men do not realize how they exemplify the cruelty of humanity. Sin goes deep in us. We could all be like those soldiers—calloused, heartless and making sport of a man who is dying because we consider him a low-life anyway.

Think about it. How many of us are shocked by the killings that take place in our city every month? Hopefully all of us. But when the dead are gang members or drug dealers, our thoughts may go something like this: “Oh well, that's a few less criminals in the world!” When I have those thoughts, I don't think of myself as callous. But that changes when I consider my thoughts in light of the soldiers beneath the cross of Jesus. The truth is that I could have done the very thing to Jesus that the soldiers were doing. It's only the grace of God that spares us from falling farther and farther into sin and becoming hardened to it.

So with their training and experience, the soldiers did as they were ordered. They strip Jesus of everything. They drive one nail into his left hand, another into his right, and still a third larger spike through both of his feet at once. With his body firmly nailed to the cross, the soldier join together to lift Jesus and, in one

motion, drop the cross into the hole in the ground when his body gets jolted and tugged on those giant nails, sending extreme pain throughout Jesus' body.

But the soldiers don't flinch. They don't care. It's just their job. Once that is done, it's still early in the day. They sit down beneath the cross, waiting for the crucifixion to do its work. "What should we do to pass the time?" one soldier asks another. "I don't know," his friend replies. Then one of them mentions Jesus' clothes! "Let's throw dice to see who gets them!" The other soldiers nod their instant approval of a great idea--gambling on the job, something fun to do while maintaining their post by the cross.

The Bible doesn't actually say that they threw dice. But that was a common form of entertainment back then and it's a possible translation for what is called *casting lots*. Under Roman law, the soldiers are legally entitled to take the belongings of the men they crucify. So when they discover that Jesus' garment is one piece, they say,

*Jn 19:24 "Let's not tear it," ... "Let's decide by lot who will get it."*

John then adds,

*This happened that the scripture (Psalm 22:18) might be fulfilled which said, "They divided my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing."*

Like championship gamblers in Texas-hold 'em style games, they sit in a circle beneath the cross, ready to beat each other at the game. Hoffman writes, "In an intense moment the soldiers placed their bets. Then with one throw and a huge adrenaline rush, it is over. One winner, and many losers.... What a shocking and interesting mix. On the cross behind their backs hung a not-very-ordinary man in agony, yet Jesus was acutely aware of them, and of many others. While they lightened him of his clothes, he was receiving the weight of sin, and paying the penalty for it. It was an enormously historic moment, and these guys were oblivious, just having fun throwing dice."

Think of it for a moment, though. Jesus hangs naked on the cross. When he was born in Bethlehem, his nakedness is covered with swaddling clothes. Now on the cross his humiliation is intensified. Even his undergarment is taken from him and gambled away. When Adam and Eve sinned, God gave them clothes. Nakedness was nothing to be ashamed of before sin but immediately after eating the fruit of the forbidden tree, Genesis records,

*Gen 3: 7 Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.*

And when God ask Adam, "Where are you?"

*Gen 3: 10 He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."*

And finally we read this:

*Gen 3:21 The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.*

You see, dear friends, our clothes are given to us by God as a sign of his grace. They keep us from being ashamed. We don't think of them that way, but they were that for Adam and Eve. And they are that for us as well. And that's what is significant about Jesus having his clothes taken away. To the soldiers this is just part of the humiliating punishment for a criminal. But to God, it is part of the plan to pay the penalty for sin. As Jesus' clothes are taken from him it is a sign that God's grace even in the common things of life is taken from his beloved Son. Jesus bears the agony and shame of sin apart from even the common graces of everyday life.

As theologian Klaas Schilder put it, all grace must depart from the Christ...He is descending into hell. He had to undergo also the humiliation of nakedness... (*Christ Crucified*, 172) When God took the clothes from his Son, that Son no longer was allowed to move through the world for one's clothes give one the privilege of going about... Let him hide behind a bush as he can. *But Jesus cannot.* The first Adam was able to do so! The second is still limited to his nakedness. Nails, spikes, and the heat of the catastrophic day! ...O God, he cannot escape, he cannot hide." (175)

Yes, dear friends, when God's Son is paying for our sin even his clothes are stripped away. That's part of the agony in Christ's voice when he cries out to his Father. The soldiers, of course, don't realize that. It's just a regular day at work for them. They are just gambling for some garment.

Most of us gamble a little. Statistics say that coffee sales at Tim Hortons increase during the Roll Up the Rim contest! We all like to win! Maybe you actually gamble for more significant things. What about your life? Are you willing to gamble with that? Seems many in our world do.

However, the good news of Good Friday is that Jesus ensures that we don't need to gamble with our soul. He bore the weight and shame and pain of sin for us. Countless New Testament passages tell us that we can be absolutely sure of our salvation by believing in Jesus. No gamble. The simplest verse is also the most famous one. John 3:16.

*Jn 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

Believing that promise of God is "like sitting at the card table but being able to see everyone else's cards. There's no gamble," because he tells us to believe and we will be saved. There are no surprises. No tricks. No strings attached. No fine print to get you caught up in something else. No devil in the details.

Just look to Jesus and see him for who he really is. Believe in him and have life eternal.

Remember the gambling soldiers? Something very odd happened towards the end of Jesus' crucifixion. They were waiting for the death of each man on the three crosses, so that they could take them down and be done their work for the

day. But something caught their attention. Mark tells us, Jesus cried out to the Father,

*Mk 15:34 ... "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

As the soldiers look up, Mark says,

*Mk 15:39 And when the centurion (the leader of 100 soldiers), who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"*

It's not clear whether the centurion was one of the four soldiers gambling beneath the cross of Jesus, but he was obviously close by. If nothing else, he was the supervisor of the soldiers. In any event, this centurion—in that moment of hearing Jesus' cry—sees Jesus for who he really is: the Son of **God**. Did he take the next step and believe in God's one and only Son for his salvation? Have you?

Dear friends, our comfort in this life of risks and uncertainty is that Jesus takes the gamble out of our life here on earth. We must see him for who he really is! Believe that he is the Son of God, our Saviour. Live out of his grace and for his glory. He offers us everything eternal because he willingly gave up everything in this temporal world—right down to his clothes, fully humiliated. And in doing so he gave up everything spiritual—facing a world without the grace of God—so that we might live in the light and by the strength of God's grace in this world and forevermore.

What a Saviour! Hallelujah!

Dusty Hoffman article: <http://www.everystudent.com/wires/gamble/html>