

A Sermon  
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Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **A Crowning Moment**

Matthew 27:27-31

Looking at a map of the United States, and of the world, is like looking at COVID-19's expanding empire. The spread of this virus is like a dreadful march of sickness and death, conquering new territory day by day. As far as we can tell, no place is perfectly fortified against this enemy of life. Continents, countries, states, counties, cities, suburbs, small towns, and rural areas, already have, or eventually will, feel the force of this destructive disease. True, from time to time, we get glimmers of hope that we're slowing COVID-19's advance. But right now, it's still very hard to tell when the battle will be over, and freedom will return.

The coronavirus gets its name from a spiked ring of proteins on its surface. This ring resembles a crown. Thus the title of "corona," from a Latin term referring to a crown, a garland or wreath, worn on the head as a mark of honor or an emblem of majesty. Right now, it certainly feels like the coronavirus is extending its oppressive power, and exercising its degrading, destructive authority, in territory all over the globe. Over a million human beings have been harmed, and tens of thousands killed, by COVID-19's dominion.

But today is a sacred opportunity to remember another crown, and another dominion, a reign that brings life not death. I'm speaking of the reign of Christ. In today's text from Matthew, Jesus appears very helpless and powerless at the hands of the powers that be. Our Lord has been on trial before the Roman authorities, and found guilty of treason against the empire. As part of his sentencing, the Romans have just finished flogging him. This was a horrible beating administered on the bare back with a leather whip. The whip was often studded with pieces of metal or bone, designed to increase the suffering and torture. In some cases, the person died from flogging.

Now Jesus is taken to the headquarters of the Roman governor. Here in Pilate's palace, some of his soldiers gather around Jesus. They've decided to hold a coronation ceremony. Since Jesus has claimed to be the "king of the Jews," that's exactly how they'll treat him. They'll honor him as royalty.

First they strip Jesus. Then they take a soldier's cape and robe him, to give him the look of an emperor. And what ruler would be complete without a scepter to carry as an emblem of his authority. So they eventually take a stick and put it in Jesus' right hand. Then the soldiers get down on their knees and mock him. "Hail, king of the Jews. Hail, king of the Jews." Then they escalate from verbal abuse to physical abuse. They spit on Jesus. They grab the stick from his hand and hit him over the head again and again and again.

As the old hymn, sung especially at this time of the year, puts it: "O sacred Head, now wounded, / with grief and shame weighed down, / Now scornfully surrounded / with thorns, Thine only crown." Yes, we particularly remember the crown of thorns. For in between robing Jesus and putting the scepter in his hand, the soldiers took some branches from an available shrub and twisted them together to make what every king has to have, a crown. Jesus is forced to wear a corona of thorns. We sometimes think of these thorns as turned inward to pierce Jesus' head, so as to draw blood and create pain. But it's likely that these long thorns were turned primarily outward to imitate crowns of that day and time. That

way the ruler's image, often portrayed on coins, would have the appearance of rays of divinity surrounding his head.

This is the time of the year that we would normally open up the church's plastic containers and start pulling out items that enhance our worship space for Holy Week. Somewhere on our communion table you would see the crown of thorns, displayed as a reminder of our Lord's suffering for our redemption. And along with the crown, the palm leaves, the cross, the nails, the purple cloth, the bread, the cup. Today we have to focus on these items with the mind's eye. We can't gather at the communion table in our church sanctuary, but we can assemble electronically, remembering and recounting the central events in the story of our salvation.

Before Jesus is crucified and buried, he's crowned. In the midst of their mock coronation, Jesus' tormentors can't see that he really is the world's true king. His kingship doesn't look like the way that sovereignty and authority are often exercised in the present age. Jesus receives violence rather than inflicting it. Instead of causing suffering, Jesus takes it upon himself. He lays down power, so that we can experience the most remarkable power of all, the power of forgiveness and a restored relationship with God. Jesus endures the shame, the humiliation, and the pain, so that we can be saved.

Theologian and author Graham Tomlin has written, "If power is influence, the ability to get things done, to make things happen, to change circumstances and people, how does God achieve the most difficult thing imaginable: the salvation of the world? Answer: through a crucified messiah."<sup>1</sup> A crucified messiah. Seemingly a contradiction in terms. But what looks to human eyes like a contradiction is actually God's wisdom, God's power, God's way of asserting his rule in the world. So don't be misled by the crown of thorns. The soldiers may have intended it to be an act of ridicule. But God intended it to be a sign of redemption. Redemption through God's own self-emptying, self-sacrificing love.

With Easter just a week away, I realize that Christmas may be a distant memory. But don't lose sight of the fact that in one sense, Jesus came into this world wearing a crown. Think of the magi, who arrive in Jerusalem asking, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?" (Matt. 2:1-2). The wise men knew a king when they saw one. They knew that this child was royalty. As soon as they arrived at Joseph and Mary's house, they got on their knees and worshiped Jesus. The magi saw what those Roman soldiers, with their crown of thorns, did not see.

Jump forward a little bit further in Matthew's Gospel. Recall that before he began his public ministry, Jesus spent time in the wilderness, where Satan put him to the test. The final temptation was an offer for Jesus to rule the kingdoms of the world. In other words, to take the spot that was presently occupied by the Roman emperor. There was only one catch. Jesus would have to get down on his knees in worship, and let the devil run his life. But Jesus refused the offer. He wouldn't deviate from the conviction that sovereignty belongs to God alone.

So when faced with the chance to take the crown worn by the emperor and wear it himself, Jesus took a different path. As preacher Helmut Thielicke puts it, "(Jesus) rose up from the place where the kingdoms of the world shimmered before him, where crowns flashed and banners rustled, and hosts of enthusiastic people were ready to acclaim him, and quietly walked the way of poverty and suffering to the cross."<sup>2</sup>

J. Wallace Hamilton tells the story about a popular monk during the Middle Ages who announced that in the cathedral that evening he would preach a sermon on the love of God. As the people gathered and stood in silence, waiting for the service to begin, sunlight streamed through the beautiful windows. When the last bit of color had faded from the windows, the old monk went to the candelabrum, took a lighted candle, and walked over to

the life-size statue on the cross. He held the light beneath the wounds on Jesus' feet, then his hands, then his side. Then, still without a word, he let the light shine on Jesus' thorn-crowned brow. That was his sermon. The people stood in silence and wept. As Hamilton says, "They knew that they were at the center of a mystery beyond their knowing, that they were indeed looking at the love of God—a love so deep, so wide, so eternal that no words could express it and no mind could measure it."<sup>3</sup>

Holy Week resists all attempts to take the love of God and turn it primarily into a concept or an idea. In Jesus Christ, God's love became a flesh and blood reality. Like that monk with his silent sermon, we use today and the days leading up to next Sunday to shine the light on our tortured, mocked, and crucified Savior. As one writer reminds us, "God's love is not theoretical; it's a crown of thorns pressed into Jesus's brow, nails driven through sinew and bones, and ultimately, his brutal death."<sup>4</sup>

Christ's death, and its significance, are captured and conveyed in many forms and ways, especially at this time of the year. One way is through music. What better example than the hymn, "The Old Rugged Cross:" ". . . I'll cherish the old rugged cross / Till my trophies at last I lay down / And I will cling to the old rugged cross / And exchange it some day for a crown." Christ wore the crown of thorns so that we who believe in him and follow his way can someday wear a crown of our own, and share in his everlasting reign.

The Netflix series *The Crown* follows the life of Queen Elizabeth II. In one episode, the Queen travels to Ceylon on a diplomatic tour and appoints her sister, Princess Margaret, to represent her at minor royal engagements. Princess Margaret has long been unhappy with Elizabeth's lack of flair as a queen, so she takes the opportunity "bring color and personality to the Monarchy." She speaks her own mind, jokes with the press, and belittles other dignitaries. Eventually British Prime Minister Winston Churchill rebukes the Princess and relieves her of her duties as a representative. He explains to her that she was not appointed to represent herself. Churchill says, "Your Royal Highness, when you appear in public, performing official duties, you are not you." "Of course I'm me," replies the Princess. To which Churchill answers, "The Crown. That's what they've come to see, not you."<sup>5</sup>

The crown. Christ's crown. That's what we want people to see. True, by faith we already share in Christ's eternal reign, and anticipate its full revelation when he comes again. But for now, we're here to point beyond ourselves to him and his sovereignty, his crown. This crown of thorns doesn't look like the way that the world conceives of power and authority and triumph. But it's Christ's way, the way of self-sacrificing love. And the gospel promises us that this sovereign love of the Savior, poured out for sinners like us, will have the last word, not any other power or force that tries to rule over us. Not even COVID-19, with its own crown, its own ring of radiance. For you see, no matter how much territory the coronavirus looks like its conquering, we still proclaim that the world's true king has already been coronated through his death and resurrection. Jesus Christ has already been given "all authority in heaven and on earth" (Matt. 28:18). And he will reign for ever and ever.

<sup>1</sup> Graham Tomlin, *Looking Through the Cross* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) 65.

<sup>2</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *Leadership* (Vol.1, No. 3).

<sup>3</sup> J. Wallace Hamilton, "The Love of God," in *Interpreting Ephesians for Preaching and Teaching*, ed. Scott Nash (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 1996) 81.

<sup>4</sup> Dorothy Littell Greco, "Everyday Choices." Christianity Today website. Accessed April 3, 2020 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/women/devotions/2017/redemptive-power-of-sacrificial-love/everyday-choices.html>>.

<sup>5</sup> "The Crown," Season 1, Episode 8, "Pride and Joy." Preaching Today website. Accessed April 3, 2020 <<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2018/february/we-are-ambassadors-for-christ-not-for-ourselves.html>>.