

Mark 8:31-38
Feb. 28, 2021

Grace and peace be with you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

On Feb. 22, 1943, Sophie Scholl, was executed.

Along with her brother Hans and their friend Christoph Probst, these leaders of the White Rose Society at the University of Munich were killed by the guillotine for their resistance to the Nazi party.

As the Nazi party took over Germany in the 1930s, Hans was initially very enthusiastic about being a part of the Hitler Youth even though his own father was fervently against it. His father, Robert Scholl, was a politician who criticized the Nazis from the very beginning.

The Hitler Youth was formed to indoctrinate and brain wash youth into supporting the Nazi Party. If you have seen Jojo Rabbit, you know what I'm talking about. Turning Jesus own words against those who denounced Nazism, the youth were told that they might have to disown their own parents if they did not follow Hitler.

Coming off the great poverty of the Weimar Republic, many people felt that anything was better than that horrible time and initially many people thought they were on the road to recovery, so they really didn't care what was happening in the background. Do what you gotta do.

In 1941, Hans was sent to the Warsaw ghetto where he saw firsthand what was actually happening to the "inferior races." He was party to the Jews being forced out of their homes and there he learned of the atrocities of the killing camps.

Sickened by what he had been a part of, Hans returned to the University of Munich wanting better for his fellow Germans. In Warsaw, he came to understand what his father had been talking about.

Back at the University, Hans and his sister Sophie and their friend Hugo Schmorell, who had also gone to Warsaw, formed a group called the White Rose Society. Their goal was to open the eyes of their fellow classmates and stir them to action. As Christians, they understood it to be their duty to bring an end to Hitler's rule and the massive killings happening all over Germany and Poland.

In their first pamphlet they wrote: “Offer passive resistance – resistance – wherever you may be. Forestall the spread of this atheistic war machine before it is too late, before the last cities have been reduced to rubble and before the nation’s last young man has given his blood on some battlefield for the hubris of a sub-human.” With that statement, they turned the table on Hitler. The Jews were not subhuman, Hitler was.

And then they ended with their most powerful line: “Do not forget that every people deserves the regime it is willing to endure.” Basically - if you do not resist, it will persist, and it will be your own fault.

This letter was influenced by Bishop Galen who had been preaching against the Nazi Party’s worship of race from at least 1934.

In their second letter, they reported that 300,000 Jews had been murdered in Germany in the “most bestial way.” They wanted their fellow students to know the truth so that they could help bring an end to the fascism that had taken over the land.

In all, the White Rose Society was able to distribute 6 pamphlets.

After working together to write and print the pamphlets, Sophie and Hans would leave the pamphlets outside packed lecture halls so that students could read them on their way out of class. On Feb. 18, 1943, after having secretly distributed their 6th pamphlet to all of the lecture halls, they still had some left.

Sophie, moved by the Spirit, threw those pamphlets off of the balcony and watched them cascade to the ground.

The janitor saw her and immediately reported her to the Gestapo. She and Hans were quickly arrested, swiftly found guilty, and promptly sentenced to death by the Nazi’s People’s Court whose job it was to execute anyone who spoke against the Fuhrer.

As they headed to the guillotine, Sophie said, “Such a fine day, and I have to go, but what does my death matter, if through us thousands of people are awakened and stirred to action.”

And they were. The 6th pamphlet was smuggled out of Germany. The Allies copied the pamphlet and dropped millions of them all over Germany.

Sophie, Hans, and their friends named themselves the White Rose Society after B. Traven's book by the same name, which told the story of oppressed people standing against an evil regime. In the face of evil, the white rose stood to testify to the truth.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus asks us to take up our crosses and follow him. He goes on to say, "For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"

This is the question Sophie, Hans, Hugo, and all of the members of the White Rose Societies were asking their fellow German citizens and answering with their own lives.

If you are a Christian, how can you allow others to be unjustly murdered? You have been given life to promote life not to allow for the destruction of the innocent for your own benefit.

Many of their fellow German citizens turned a blind eye. Many were in total denial, but for those who were able to comprehend the gravity of the situation, the White Rose Society was encouraging them to action.

On Wednesday evenings during Lent, we are studying the Sermon on the Mount with Dr. AJ Levine. She is a Jewish scholar of the New Testament. Last week we talked about the "blessed are" statements. Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted.

A point she was making in her discussion on the "blessed are" statements is that we are blessed when we can see the injustices in the world and yearn for something better. There are some who cannot or do not want to see the evil happening around them. They believe that ignorance is bliss, which perhaps it is.

But, for those who do see the wrong that surrounds us, like Sophie and Hans did, we are actually blessed, and when we are moved to do something, we are picking up the cross and following Jesus.

Christ was murdered in the most egregious way possible. He was murdered unjustly, and so we cry out for the murder of all of the innocents on the cross. It is only then that we are gifted with the resurrection.

If you can't see the death, then there is no way you can understand the resurrection. That's why we do Passion Sunday with Palm Sunday. You can't have the resurrection without the crucifixion!

There is evil in the world, but God is stronger, and we are called to testify to that.

Jesus was crucified, because he stood up against oppressive regimes. Jesus stood up against those who put profit over human lives. That's what got Jesus nailed to the cross, and that is the cross we are called to pick up. Life is more important than money. Period.

Lent is a season of remembering what our baptism is all about. In the covenant we make in the affirmation of our baptisms, we promise to seek justice and peace in the world. Notice that it is justice and then peace. No justice, no peace.

And again, this is not punitive justice. This is not an eye for an eye. This is God's justice, which means that everyone gets a fair chance to live. It's not that we just don't kill someone, but that we help the other person live. So, we advocate for clean water, safe housing, and good schools. We stand up against oppression in all of its forms, and confess when we find ourselves wrapped up in its proliferation.

We, most likely, hopefully, will never be like Sophie and Hans fighting fascism in the midst of a world war, but we can take up our crosses against oppression and injustice wherever we do find ourselves.

There is a Jr. High principle in Indiana who had a student sent to his office to be sent home for wearing a hat in class. When he found out why the student was wearing a hat, because of a bad haircut, the principle didn't send the student home, but had compassion and helped him by cleaning up his haircut. Luckily he had experience in doing such things.

It would have been unjust to make a student go home for something that was beyond his ability to change on his own. Compassion for those who are suffering in any way shape or form, even if it's just from embarrassment, is our cross to bear. By helping the student with his hair cut, the principle helped him live. The simple haircut gave the student an environment in which he could learn. Just caring about someone is all it takes.

Justice is never about the rules, because they can be totally unjust. Justice, God's justice, is simply about compassion. Out of pure compassion for us, Jesus was killed and resurrected back to life, setting us free from all oppression so that we can have compassion for others.

Whenever we act with compassion, we take up our cross and follow Jesus.

Thanks be to God. Amen.