

“Who Is This Son of Man?”

May 17, 2020

Mark 10:32-45

Read Mark 10:32-45

This is the Word of the Lord.

Prayer of Invocation

Why did Jesus have to die?

Oof. *That's* what we are going to talk about in the middle of a time of quarantine from a deadly virus? Have we not had enough death talk already?

Maybe.

But here is the bottom line: we talk about death – and Jesus' death specifically – because Jesus defeated death. The very specter that is at the front of every newscast and every decision and every restriction we are experiencing – death – that is the very thing Jesus set his face toward in order to conquer. And, as a result, death *has* been conquered. We do not need to live in fear. We do not live in fear.

Even so, when children ask, why did Jesus have to die? I take a deep breath and sigh. How do you sum this up in concrete terms? I had the same reaction when thinking about preaching to all of you today: what can people in isolation hear and receive in video format regarding the truth of the gospel?

Why *did* Jesus *have* to die?

One correct answer is: Jesus had to die because God sent him to die. That may seem a little abrupt, but it is true. Jesus' death on the cross was God's plan, God's purpose, God's *goodness*.

A second correct answer is that Jesus had to die because we needed him to die. Because of our rebellion and sin against God, because we cannot do anything to earn or deserve a judgment of righteousness before a holy God, we need someone to save us. This is not a hypothetical situation – it is the human condition this side of the kingdom of God. God's holiness is no joke – and our standing in the presence of God's holiness is not possible as we are immersed, covered, and stained through and through with sinfulness. We needed Jesus to die for us – on our behalf and in our stead – so that as our representative he would take the full consequences of what we should have incurred. He saved us. Because he did, we can – we can stand in the presence of God spotless and without blemish.

A third answer is that Jesus had to die because of how much God loves us. Jesus said, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (John 3:16-17) God saved us by Jesus' death.

Jesus' death – as awful as it was, as necessary as it was, as powerful as it was – is ultimately *good* news. God did not intend it to bind us up in guilt and shame. God planned it so that we would be released from guilt and shame to experience life.

That brings us back to our text today. Last week, we read about the rich man who loved the blessings more than the one who gave the blessings. He went from Jesus shocked and grieving. Jesus remarked about how difficult it would be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God. Now, this week, Jesus – who had not long before been transfigured in glory before Peter, James, and John – that same Jesus set aside all the glory in obedience to his Father. Paul would later include a great Christ-hymn in his letter to the Philippians, saying, “he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross.”

Mark's juxtaposition is powerful: the rich man who could not give up his worldly blessing to follow Jesus; and Jesus who gave up his eternal glory to stand in our stead.

The scene began with Jesus getting this whole troop on the road, going up to Jerusalem. Mark included this observation: Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. This puzzled me. Why would they be amazed and why would his followers be afraid? Remember where they were and what was happening around them.

They were among crowds journeying to get into Jerusalem for the Passover festival. This was a big deal. To get an idea of the atmosphere, imagine Independence Day with bands and food and excitement and people all around. They would sing Psalms as they walked toward the gates of Jerusalem. These Psalms reminded the people of the sovereignty of Yahweh. They were songs of God's goodness; they were songs remembering how God delivered them from their enemies.

The annual Passover festival tested the limits of Roman tolerance and patience. As long as the crowds simply sang old songs, the Romans would not intervene. However, as soon as it began to look like there would be any kind of insurrection, any kind of uprising, any kind of revolutionary fervor, the Romans would crack down. Hard. They would crack down in oppressive and deadly ways.

Then, there was Jesus. His fame was increasing. There were reports of his deeds of power. He was publicly proclaiming the coming of the kingdom of God in lands occupied by the Roman Empire and, more immediately, a heavy contingent of Roman soldiers. Many people were discussing whether he was the Messiah, the Anointed One of God – this was precisely the kind of situation that could push the Romans over the edge.

So, to put it in a nutshell: the Pharisees were against him, the Temple authorities were against him, and the Romans would not hesitate to act against him if things got out of hand. He was a dangerous man, walking into a dangerous situation.

That is why his disciples were amazed. That is why the people following him were afraid. With all that going on, Jesus walked ahead of them. They could get caught up in any kind of melee that developed. Jesus was fully aware of the danger he face – and He led from the front. In the forward march of the kingdom of God, Jesus led the procession.

Then, Jesus took the twelve aside and told them – again – what was going to happen. Do not miss this: **Jesus knew he was going to die.**

Our text today was the third time of Jesus spoke about his passion that Mark recorded. The first followed Peter's confession. The second followed the transfiguration. This third was the most direct and showed that Jesus knew the political and judicial process by which he would be put to death. Jesus told the disciples that they were headed to Jerusalem for the purpose of his suffering and death and resurrection. They did not seem to pick up on the significance of it – or – more likely, simply misunderstood how the kingdom of God was to be ushered in. Palm Sunday was more akin to their thinking. Good Friday just did not fit into the equation; Jesus' talk about suffering and death were simply a metaphor for the struggle, it was not supposed to *actually* happen.

The Passion predictions are important because they show that Jesus did not go to the cross by accident. It was not a mistake. His revelation about what was going to happen demonstrates that God had a plan and that the plan was completed. The disciples were crushed when Jesus was crucified. They were anticipating the restoration of a human kingdom – the Romans ousted and glory restored to Jerusalem. To see Jesus on the cross; well, that just seemed to be about as opposite of the coming kingdom as they could imagine. But after the resurrection, they recalled the predictions of his rising again. It was not an allegory. It was not a metaphor. He actually meant it – and he actually did it.

This leads us to the second thing. **Jesus' obedience unto death – even death on a cross – demonstrated the life of obedience to which we are all called.** This totally escaped the disciples. How do we know? We know because of what followed: James and John were part of Jesus' inner circle and they came to him with a request that he honor that status in the new kingdom. The brothers' request to sit at Jesus left and right suggested that they thought that the ultimate fulfillment of kingdom of God was coming soon, if not immediately. When Jesus started calling himself the Son of Man, the disciples went to that Daniel passage, the vision of the Son of Man coming in power and establishing an everlasting kingdom of glory and dominion. The establishment of the eternal throne of David in Jerusalem may require some suffering, but that would be a short-term problem with the reward of the kingdom of God following right behind.

But for Jesus, the focus was on the work of the Son of Man leading to the cross.

If was look at the circumstances, we can see that Jesus easily could have avoided the cross. He did not have to head to Jerusalem. He did not have to continue teaching and preaching in ways that challenged the religious authorities. He did not have to continue bringing his growing number of disciples to Jerusalem such that the Roman authorities would be nervous about a violent insurrection seeking to restore the throne of David. He could have avoided all of it.

He did not. In obedience – even to the point of his death at the hands of Gentiles, ostracized from the people of God and killed in the most ignominious fashion possible – Jesus fulfilled the work of the Son of God. God’s plan was victorious in a way that seems like utter defeat in human terms.

The life of obedience Jesus led is the model of the life to which we are called. Remember the juxtaposition with the rich man who valued the blessings more than the one who blesses. The writer of Hebrews exhorted readers, “Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:1-2). Don’t hold onto the blessings more tightly than your obedience to the one who blesses.

Which brings us to the third thing: Jesus pointed the disciples in a new understanding of greatness. James and John’s request headed in the wrong direction. They sought personal glory and power. Jesus sought to serve God.

The kingdom of God is not a political power structure like the United States government. Even though the disciples had already begun early campaigns for glory positions, Jesus was having none of it. The Kingdom of God also is not like American Idol, where the weak are mocked and scorned. Those who are greatest in the kingdom of God are most often the least in our own eyes.

Pay attention to that in these times: the people making the biggest impact are *not* on television. The people making the biggest impact are laboring anonymously in hospital rooms, in low-paying jobs stocking, providing take-out, and making deliveries. The people making the biggest impact are making phone calls, reaching out to the lonely and hurting. Friends, those making the biggest impact – the greatest among us – are serving others selflessly.

If the LORD tarries, years from now most people worshipping as part of First Presbyterian Church Carson City will not know or remember our names. They will hear about these times and they will see what fruit was born. How did we respond to God’s call in these days? Did we seek to hold onto what we have – our blessings – or did we seek to look outward and be a blessing in our community? The witness and legacy of this congregation is not dependent upon later generations remembering any of our individual names. It *is* dependent upon the fruit we bear as we serve God, proclaim the gospel, and as we reach out as Christ’s ambassadors in this community.

And the final thing returns us to our first question: why did Jesus *have* to die? Because he came to give his life as a ransom for many.

This is one of the clearest explanations of the work of the Son of God. The incarnation had a purpose, it had a goal, it was more than a friendly visit. It was more than an orientation or training to be citizens of the kingdom of heaven; yes, it was those things, but it was much, much more foundational.

Jesus was clear here that he gave his life for ours. He stood in our place. He stepped in to save us where we were unable to save ourselves. The theological term is: **substitutionary atonement**. Jesus made right what we had made wrong and could not fix. Jesus suffered the consequences of our sin

and brokenness so that we would not be destroyed. Jesus redeemed us from our just fate of judgment and condemnation. He took our place.

Dealing with sin was why Jesus is more than a good teacher, a good man, a good example. The cross and resurrection are the stumbling block for so many people because they involve judgment and wrath for *our sin*. In the cross Jesus takes on the sin of the world, the judgment of God destroying all that which would oppose his good and perfect will, and engages death fully and completely. Our sin is paid for: completely. In his resurrection, Jesus proved that God is more powerful than death.

Jesus' death – as awful as it was, as necessary as it was, as powerful as it was – is ultimately *good* news. God did not intend it to bind us up in guilt and shame. God planned it so that we would be released from guilt and shame to experience life.

Further, you have heard me say several times recently, “Death does not have the last word.” Jesus said that: Jesus predicted he would be victorious over death. Jesus was not only declaring victory over the Romans – the worst they could do was torture and kill him – but he was declaring victory over death itself. And, he did not wait until afterward to say so; he said it on his way into Jerusalem.

Now everyone knows that dead people do not get up. The disciples knew that dead people do not get up. Some Jews believed in some sort of heavenly resurrection; that is, their spirits might be raised in heaven in the presence of God. It was a mystery to be debated. But whatever it was, it was way down the road and it was not something that they ever expected they would experience.

Jesus said, “I am going to be killed and I am going to be raised up from the dead.” He was really going to be dead and then he was really going to be alive. It is no wonder that the disciples did not get it, we still struggle today even though we know he did it.

Because he said it ahead of time and then did it, it is a confirmation that we can believe his other promises, too. Specifically, we can trust the promises he made: the victory Jesus won over death, he gives to us. When he said he came to give his life as a ransom for many, he meant it and then he did it. When he said he would be raised from the dead – and that “whosoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life” – so we can be confident that we will have eternal life in him.

One final thought about this: **was this the only way that God could have redeemed us?**

That question kind of misses the point. It was the way that God *did redeem* us. He chose this way from the beginning of time and, even if it does not make sense to us, it made sense to God. The captive does not usually get to critique the method of their redemption; instead, they are grateful to the one who has saved them.

I want to remind us all where we are in this gospel. Mark is writing to believers in the early church in Rome; most likely during a period when they were experiencing persecution. They were paying for their faith with their lives. Mark was writing to encourage them, to teach them, to inspire them. Jesus was who they had been taught he was. Today, we in Carson City are going through some hard times – albeit different in that Christians are not being blamed for the pandemic – and Mark's words are just as relevant. Jesus is who we have been taught he is.

The first half of the gospel, Mark 1-8, was designed to raise and answer the question, “Who is this?” That culminates in Peter’s confession, “You are the Christ.” Jesus’ *power* – over illness, over evil, over death, over the established religion (including the gods of the Romans) – was the theme. The second half focuses on his work as the Son of God. It is work that leads Jesus directly to the cross, to give his life as a ransom, as a redeeming purchase, for many.

“For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

He did serve. He did give his life as a ransom. You and I have life because Jesus died – and – rose again victorious over death. Thank God! Praise God!

Amen.

Questions:

1. Why did Jesus have to die? How would you explain this to a 10-year-old child? (This is how YOU would explain it; not how I explained it. Feel free to refer to mine, but take the time to put it into your own words.)
2. What did Jesus’ death accomplish? What does that mean for how you live here and now?
3. What are you doing in these days of quarantine to bear fruit for the glory of God? How are you taking steps to leave a legacy of faith for later generations that will look at this time to see how we responded?