

What Jesus Does – The Atonement

Matthew 17:1-9 and 1 Peter 1:16-21

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Transfiguration of the Lord

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Today we continue our sermon series on the basic beliefs of the Christian faith. We're following the Apostles' Creed as an outline. Last week Sam introduced us to Jesus with a reflection on who Jesus is. And this week we continue to think about Jesus, but we turn to what he did, what he came to do.

And what he came to do is sometimes summarized in the word "atonement," which means a reconciling of the world to God, making things right once again.

Today is a day on the church calendar that is known as the Feast of the Transfiguration. And those of you who grew up in more liturgical churches know that this day always precedes the beginning of Lent. It always occurs on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday.

The story I am about to read is in many ways a turning point in Jesus' ministry. His whole life, of course, is a journey to the cross, but after today there is no longer any doubt about what he has come to do.

The story of the Transfiguration occurs in each of the first three gospels, but let's read Matthew's account today, which is found in chapter 17...

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ² And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³ Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴ Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." ⁵ While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" ⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." ⁸ And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. ⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

We are going to talk about something very difficult today. I guess I say that to you as a warning. It's not that the previous sermons in this series have been so easy. What I mean is that the subject for today – the crucifixion of Christ – is so difficult to think about.

It's difficult in two senses. One is the death itself, which was unimaginably brutal and violent and bloody. It was a favorite method of execution for the Romans because it sent such a powerful message.

And so, what this means is that Jesus' death is so difficult that we tend to avoid it altogether. How would you explain it to a child, for example? How would you do a children's sermon about it? I found out this week that in Sunday school we tend not to talk about it at all – this subject that is central to our faith. Instead, we tend to move quickly to the resurrection, which is a subject we happen to like. We talk to children about butterflies and how the caterpillar is transformed.

We try our best, in other words, to make something very difficult and troubling seem so beautiful. And inoffensive. Who's offended by the thought of a butterfly emerging from its cocoon?

But I want you to see that this subject – the crucifixion of Christ – is difficult for another reason. And you may not be aware of this, but in the last 10 to 20 years the crucifixion has been the subject of intense debate among theologians.

They have been revisiting all the old questions – why did Jesus have to die? Was it really necessary? Couldn't God have accomplished what he needed to accomplish in some other way? And why did he have to die in this way, in such a brutal and violent and humiliating manner?

Even the doctrine of the Trinity, which we have not yet explored, becomes part of this conversation. How is it that a loving Father would want to seek vengeance on his innocent Son? What kind of Father-Son relationship would that be?

I think it's interesting that the "Book of the Year" last year, according to *Christianity Today*, is titled *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ*. I used a quotation from that book for the front of the bulletin today, partly to show you that people, Christian people, are still talking about this subject. They are still trying to find the language to say what we believe.

I don't find this troubling, by the way. You may wonder why people are still talking about this. Your response might be, **"Hasn't that question been settled? Why are we still arguing about it?"**

But I don't find this to be troubling at all. In some ways, I find it exciting. To think that 2,000 years after the event we are still trying to understand it and to get it right. You could say that each new generation has to confront the fact of Jesus' death and come to terms with it.

The author of that prize-winning book I mentioned, Fleming Rutledge, is an American preacher – not a theologian in the academic sense of that word, though she is very much a scholar and a careful thinker. And she writes that she has been thinking about this subject since she was 13 years old. **"What does it mean,"** she wondered as a teenager, **"that Jesus died for the sin of the world?"**

And of course it's not just 13 year-olds, who grow up to be pastors and preachers, who wonder about that question.

I want to come back to Fleming Rutledge and her book a little bit later, but I want to mention that the crucifixion has been raising questions for people from the beginning.

The church in Corinth must have been a difficult place to be a member. If you don't believe me, read the letters that Paul wrote to them. Those people were tough on each other, and they were tough on their pastors. They must have complained one time to Paul about his preaching. They were hoping for comforting or inspiring messages, filled with advice for finding inner peace and strength, or something, and Paul – this made them so angry - Paul kept talking about the cross.

In his first letter to that troubled church – second chapter – Paul writes, **“When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom...I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”**

So, Paul – this is so interesting to think about – Paul made the cross the center of his message. He had only one theme, and that was it.

And the question is why? No one liked it. The Jewish members of that congregation hated it. And so did the Gentiles. In the first chapter of that first letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote, **“...we proclaim Christ crucified, [which is] a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles.”**

And the question, of course, is why did he continue to do it?

I think you know – or at least suspect – the answer to that question. Until we get this right, until we confront the cross in all of its ugliness and pain, until we surrender ourselves to the power of it, we have not really understood, deep down, what the gospel is about.

Look, I want to make the most basic statement that can be made about this subject. And frankly this is the scandal of our faith. All the religions of the world have certain traits in common.

Someone once wrote that there are 15 traits that all religions share, ranging from the Golden Rule (“do unto others what you would have them to do unto you”) to the importance of peace (“Blessed are the peacemakers”). And if we took the time this morning, we could probably list the rest of them.

And do you know something? There may be some truth to that. There are similarities. Jesus, Buddha, Krishna, Mohammed, Shankara, Confucius – we are tempted to say, or we want to believe, that they all taught pretty much the same thing.

Except that it's not true. Which I think you know.

As Fleming Rutledge puts it, **“...until the gospel of Jesus Christ burst upon the Mediterranean world, no one in the history of human imagination had conceived of such a thing as the worship of a crucified man.”**

When the apostle Paul wrote his Letter to the Romans, he says in the very first chapter that **“I am not ashamed of the gospel.”**

Well, that's a peculiar way to begin, don't you think? **"I am not ashamed."** What is there to be ashamed of? And then you begin to realize that our faith is built on the most peculiar premise – namely, that an itinerant Jewish preacher had been nailed up one day alongside two of society's losers, so that they could all die horribly, in full view of everyone who walked by. And the Romans always made sure that you had to walk by. These executions were unavoidable.

And Jesus' death didn't exactly result in victory. Not right away.

What he left behind after three years of work was a small group demoralized followers, most of whom had run away at the time of the arrest. And for days afterward they huddled together behind locked doors out of fear. They had no social status. Most of them had no education. And beyond that most of them were from a region of the country that, frankly, it was embarrassing to be from.

This was the most improbable start that a religion ever had.

To think that this was the beginning of a world-transforming movement would have been laughable at the time. And yet, that's what happened. Slowly at first, but gradually gaining momentum, this faith became a movement that was to transform hundreds of millions of lives. And it continues to transform lives today.

In my first seminary preaching class, my classmates and I were each assigned a verse from the Bible to preach about. We were each given a different verse, and then after a week or so of preparation we each went to the pulpit of the seminary chapel to preach our sermons. Not as easy as it sounds!

The Bible verse that I was given was Romans 1:16 ... **"for I am not ashamed of the gospel."**

It was a terrible sermon. I know that today, and to be quite honest I knew it then. My preaching professor should have told me what my piano teacher told my mother long ago – namely, that there was no use in going any further.

My biggest problem as a preacher, of course, was that I had no experience standing in a pulpit, but the other problem, and a much more serious problem, was that I had no idea what it meant to be ashamed. I had no idea at the time that the gospel of Jesus Christ was a scandal, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to the Greeks. I grew up, like many of our children here at IPC, thinking only of butterflies emerging from cocoons.

Everyone I knew was a Christian, so where was the shame?

And so I have spent the better part of my life, since that first awful sermon, trying to figure out what it means that Jesus died for me, what it means that my life has hope and meaning and purpose because of what he did for me.

I think that one of the first things I learned was that I would never get it right. My words, as much as I love them, will always be inadequate. The cross and what happened there is so far beyond human understanding that I will never get it exactly right. I try, of course. The writer in me is always looking for the right combination of words, but I know now that I will never quite get it.

The cross is at once terrible and wonderful. The cross is at once the worst method of execution ever devised (arguably it is) and, at the same time, it's a beautiful reminder of the depth of God's love for us.

So, the best I can say is that the cross is a mystery. It demands that we look at it, confront it, face up to it. It demands that we take Jesus seriously.

Thirty years or so ago, a seeker-friendly movement swept through American churches, and it has made its way across other continents as well.

The idea was to remove anything that might prevent a spiritual seeker from entering and hearing the gospel proclaimed. What did that mean in practical terms? Well, the first things to go were crosses and any other object that might create offense. Offering plates too. No one likes to be asked to give. Hymnbooks had to go as well. And a host of other things that we might count as familiar trappings of church life.

And what was wrong with that?

Let me just say, in defense of those pastors and those churches, that the impulse was right. I admire their instinct. Those pastors and those churches had a heart for spiritual seekers that most of us do not have. They were trying their best to bring people in and to present the gospel to them.

But the irony – and I suppose that it's more than an irony – the irony is that removing the cross from the center of life empties the gospel of its meaning. Without the cross we have no faith, just as we have no faith without the empty tomb. Without the cross we have the Golden Rule and the Beatitudes, but we do not have what Jesus came among us to do.

The world, as we saw a couple of weeks ago, was created good. In fact, it was not only good and lovely, but after six days of creation God was so thrilled with what he had created that he said, "**It's very good.**" You can feel his delight.

Unfortunately, his delight did not last long. By Genesis chapter 3, the world God had created was in rebellion. What was made good and lovely and perfect became stained by sin. And instead of turning his back on what he had created, instead of destroying it and starting over, God decided to make things right again, to restore things to the way they were meant to be.

This was no vengeful God taking out his anger on his only Son. This was a loving God deciding within himself – Father, Son, and Spirit together, a mutual decision – that something had to be done.

And the only way to do it was to come into the world in weakness and powerlessness, to offer himself as the last sacrifice, to take all of the sin and misery and despair on himself in one heroic moment.

And he did it. And life will never be same. Your lives will never be the same. Because of what he did. We are free. We have been set free from sin and guilt and all of the pain and hopelessness that go with them. We no longer have to feel inadequate and worthless and as though no one could possibly love us or understand us.

God has come again to take control of the world.

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.

That is what we believe.