

Why the Cross?
Isaiah 53:4-9 & Romans 6:3-11
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First Presbyterian Church

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Why the Cross?

Thank you for the opportunity to preach again. This is a warm and gracious congregation and it is always a blessing to be among you. Chris tells me you are in the midst of a sermon series on the foundations of faith. The topic today is the death and resurrection of Jesus, and what it means. Centuries of scholars, church leaders, and faithful followers of Jesus have probed the meaning of this key event in Christianity; indeed it is the heart of who we are and what we believe.

It was hard to select scripture for this morning because so much of the New Testament is an attempt to explain, explore, and celebrate the work of God in the cross of Jesus Christ. But here are two I find particularly meaningful. The first comes from the Prophet Isaiah, the “suffering servant” passage, an Old-Testament passage that Christians quickly came to identify with Jesus. The second is a passage from Paul’s writings, where he interprets the meaning of baptism as our participation in Christ’s death and resurrection.

Listen for the Word of God to you...

Isaiah 53:4-9
Romans 6:3-11

There is an impulse in our world to think we’re all the same, or at least to *want* everyone to be the same, to believe that at their heart, all religions have the same impulse. It would be so much easier in our world if our differences didn’t really matter. Then it might be easier for all of us to get along. Most often people cite the golden rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Don’t we all believe that? The best of all religions contain that truth. Love is a unifying principle, and humans have more alike than different.

But all religions are not the same. I just finished reading a book called *Untamed Hospitality* in which the author urges us not to hide behind the desire for ‘unity.’ She gives this example: at an interfaith forum, after a Christian minister was going on about how we were all the same at heart, the Muslim representative turned to him and said, “No, actually, you believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and I don’t.”

Christianity is unique in that we worship a God who became a human being and lived and died on this earth. Moreover, we worship this God-made-flesh who died a shameful death on a cross, a death we hold as the centerpiece of our faith. We are the only religion that has the hero’s death as the centerpiece. We preach Christ crucified. Others looking in at our religion find this very strange; almost macabre.

There are some churches these days who have removed the cross from their sanctuaries because it’s too off-putting. They have removed all the signs and symbols of religion – no stained-glass windows, no pulpits or tables or fonts. Just a podium up on a stage. But without the cross, the cornerstone of our faith is gone. Removing it is like tearing down a supporting wall in a house; sooner or later, everything else will collapse. If we took out the cross, much of the New Testament would disappear. The story of the last week of Jesus’ life takes fully a third of the Gospels.

But the cross is troublesome. The Apostle Paul called it “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” Why did Jesus have to die? And what good did it do?

I remember my ordination exam by the Chicago Presbytery Committee on Preparation for Ministry. It was twenty-five years ago, but I remember it as if it were yesterday – probably for all the fear and adrenaline produced at the moment.

The examiners were particularly interested in my Christology. What did I believe about Jesus Christ, his life and death and resurrection? The question

they asked me was, “Why did Jesus have to die? Was it God’s doing, or humankind’s?”

I thought for a moment, and then I said, “Both. It’s both.” I believe God did not intend evil – that is against the very nature of God. God does not *cause* brutality. It was human sin that killed Jesus – fear and anger and power gone wrong. But God also knows us – knows us better than we know ourselves. He knew human sin. If God became human, it could only lead to rejection and, ultimately, death.

Then I went on to tell a story – it seems perhaps a little trivial, but I didn’t mean it to be. I said it was like the children’s story called “The Runaway Bunny,” by Margaret Wise Brown. The story begins, simply, “Once there was a little bunny who wanted to run away.” He told his mother he would become a sailboat and sail away from her. But, she said, if he did that, she would become the wind and blow him back to her. Her child said he would become a rock high on a mountain; then, she said, she would become a mountain climber and climb to where he was. And so it went. No matter what he became, no matter how he threatened to run away, she would become whatever she needed to in order to bring him home.

That’s how it is with us. All God ever wanted was to love us as his children; but over and over again his people have run away, strayed like lost sheep. From the very first sin, that’s how it has been. Our stubbornness, our sin, our drive for independence, our rebellion – take us far away from God. God sent prophets and teachers to bring his people back. Still, nothing worked. So, in the fullness of time, God sent his son to bring his people home.

In Paul’s letter to the Philippians, we read the words of the ancient Christ-hymn, perhaps the first hymn praising God’s saving work in Jesus Christ. The hymn proclaims:

Christ though in the form of God, emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human likeness

he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.

God loves us so deeply, God will go anywhere to bring us back. Even into this world of sin. Even to the point of death. What separates us from each other – our sin, which tears us apart; and death, from which no one can return – what separates us, God has overcome. Christ's death and resurrection have overcome any power to hurt or divide us.

The cross and resurrection are inseparable. If Christ's death were the last word, then we would simply be honoring a fallen martyr. Today we honor many who have fallen, who gave their lives for a greater cause. Jesus said, "There is no greater love than to give one's life for one's friends." This is the greatest sacrifice anyone can give, and we are right to honor it.

But while such a sacrifice is a reflection of our faith, it is not the basis of our faith. The basis of our faith is Christ's death and resurrection.

Over the centuries, many have pondered the death and resurrection of Jesus; why it was necessary, and what it accomplished. There are many answers about why Christ died. Let me offer some examples. The one that is most familiar is what scholars call "Substitutionary atonement." This explanation holds that our sin and rebellion deserve punishment, but God loves us so much that he offers himself instead. Christ takes our rightful place on the cross. It echoes the words of Isaiah, "He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; on him was the punishment that made us whole... The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." We hear echoes of "substitutionary atonement" beautifully expressed in the hymn: "What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss to bear the dreadful curse for my soul?"

But there are other ways to understand the death and resurrection of Jesus. In the words we heard this morning from Paul's letter to the Romans, we heard another way to understand Christ's saving work. When we are baptized, the Apostle Paul says, we are buried with Christ and raised up again in him. Our old self – our sinful self – dies with his sinless life.

In the ancient church, this was symbolized by the ceremony of baptism. The baptismal pool was deep – deeper than a person’s height. When it came time for the person – always adults, never children in those days – the person was led down three steps into the water. There, they were put under the water. Three times, in the name of the Father, in the name of the Son, and in the name of the Spirit, they were put under. Then they were brought up on the other side – up three steps – and given a new robe, a white robe, of baptism. They had died with Christ, and rose with him. From that moment on, Christ and that person were one.

From that moment on, Paul wrote, whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s. In life, and in death, and in life beyond death, we belong to him. And nothing – neither death, nor life – can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

After my mother died, I understood this more deeply than ever before. This congregation was so kind to our family at that time, and I will always be grateful. After the service, when I went home, I found myself thinking about my mom and what ‘eternal life’ might be like for her. I thought of the image so often used, that our loved ones are sailing on to another shore, and I tried to see Mom that way, sailing off toward God’s heaven.

What came to me instead was this: I saw my mother standing on a shore, on a beautiful white-sand beach. She was young again, in her twenties, and beautiful. She glowed with the radiance of happiness I had seldom seen in this life. I saw her as if from a boat, and I realized that I was on that boat, with my family, and we were sailing on. She was standing on the beach, waving to us, as if to bless us, as if to give us a benediction, as if to send us into our future with love and confidence. It was like she was trying to tell us, this world is so much more wonderful than I ever could imagine. She was full of life, and she wanted that life for us all. She wanted us to taste the joy that she now knew.

There are many ways to interpret the meaning of Christ’s death and resurrection; it is so profound, so deep, in the end we cannot describe it merely with words. We use the language of metaphor because, in the end, nothing can contain it.

Jesus is our Lord, our Savior, our Redeemer. His death and resurrection give us life, abundant life. It is the way of the world that we will always seek another way, even though it cannot lead to life: taking power into our own hands, trying to control our circumstances and even the people we love; trying to avoid suffering and pain, even if it causes harm to ourselves or others; straying from God's way, and even running from God's love, even when we know it is the one thing we most need.

But God loves us beyond our understanding, and he will not give up. He welcomes us home, with open, loving arms; and when we do not come, he enters our world to search for us and bring us home. He sent Christ into the world to save sinners, to pay the price for our debts, to ransom us and give us freedom. He died that we might live.

Was the cross really necessary? I'm afraid so, yes. Our sin, human sin, made it inevitable. But it is not a symbol of death, but life. Overwhelming, abundant, eternal life – now and forever.

Thanks be to God.