

God Moves... to the Cross

Part 6 of Sermon Series: *God Moves...*

a sermon based on

Luke 23:1-49

(with reference to Philippians 2:5-11 & Genesis 15:1-18)

and delivered on

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Palm Sunday (Year C)

at

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It's Palm Sunday! Woo hoo! We've sung our hosannas (I'd like to have said *shouted* our hosannas, but...) Here we are at the beginning of Holy Week! Amen?

But what does that mean? Do we celebrate with Jerusalem while we hear of Jesus parading into the city on that small donkey in the midst of his disciples? Wait. That wasn't the story that we just heard. Was it? In the passage that I just read, we didn't get to hear about the adulations and shouts of joy. Instead, we get the story of Jesus' trial, his humiliation, and his crucifixion. Is that what we came here for today?....

Yes. Yes, it is. Even though the crowds may not have understood it – even though his disciples (whom he'd told repeatedly by the way) didn't understand it – Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem was not about worldly conquest. He didn't come for something as simple as casting off the yoke of Roman oppression. He didn't come to conquer any state or any person. And that confuses people.

Just this week, I was watching a video on YouTube about what Israeli Jews think about Jesus.¹ The interviewer found different people from different backgrounds and asked them the question “Who is Jesus to you?” or some other phrasing to that effect. There were a range of answers:

from the less religious, a good guy or “the Christian prophet” —

from the more devout, a man who undermined the obligations of the Torah —

from a kabbalist, a recognized prophet —

But when the question was changed to, “Why don't Jews believe he is the Messiah?” the answers were telling. “Because the age of righteousness has not been fulfilled.” In other words, the world does not look like it should when the Messiah comes. Therefore, the Messiah hasn't come. Which means this Jesus can't be the Messiah.

I think we like that pause for Palm Sunday. You know the one. The one where we stop reading the Gospel or taking it any farther that day, and just celebrate the adulations. That's what we want for Jesus. I think, too (if we're honest), that we'd like the story to go just as the crowds in Jerusalem hoped. I think we would have like to have seen him take charge and kick some unrighteous tail so that the age of righteousness would prevail. The cross doesn't do that for us (at least not emotionally). Even though we know the rest of the story, the cross still seems out of place for God's glory. Doesn't it?

It's a questions Christians have pondered since the earliest days. Why did Jesus have to die for our atonement? Lots of theologians have tried different ways to make it make sense: that his death is a substitute for our death, that his death was a ransom (to whom – certainly God owes Satan nothing), the scapegoat theory, the Satisfaction theory of St. Anselm, the Christus Victor theory. I'm not going to give a lesson on all of these theories today. Each one of them is convincing when considered alone.

But the oldest – Christus Victor – I think holds something for us today as we think about God's move toward the cross. It does that because it continues something about God's nature that we often overlook (if we know it at all). Christus Victor says that Jesus died in order to defeat the powers of evil such as sin, death and the devil. I think that's *almost* it.

Let's go back in Scripture – back to Genesis when God is establishing his covenant with Abram. This would have been a reading for the second Sunday in Lent, but we read another. I did, however, use it as the reading for the early communion service that day. In that passage (If you want to look it up later it's Genesis 15:1-18) God commands Abram to cut in half some animals: a heifer, a female goat, a ram, a turtledove, and a pigeon. These are all animals that would be used for a sacrifice. Next, God tells Abram to line the animals up one half on either side of a path.

This might sound weird or creepy to us, but it's going somewhere. In the ancient Middle East, this was the form of a Suzerain treaty. It was a treaty that bound someone to an obligation with a Suzerain either their king or maybe a defeated king to the conquering king. What happened is that the lower party in the treaty would walk the path between those animals confirming that he would honor the pact. Essentially, he was saying so be it to me if I don't keep this bargain.

Abram was probably expecting that he would be walking down that path. Remember, this is the same guy who would be reluctantly willing to sacrifice his son at God's direction. But that was what Abram was expecting. Instead, as he waited all day for the Lord's command, it never came. But then, when night fell and it seemed like all this effort was wasted, a flaming pot appeared and moved down that path. God himself walked that path. God himself bound himself to his promise to Abram and to us. Think about that. God walked the path, not Abram. God committed himself to every promise for Abram and for us.

Ultimately, that promise is restoration. Restoration to who we were meant to be before we turned away. We call it atonement, because it makes us at one with God. But it's God's doing. That is God's nature throughout Scripture. If we will allow ourselves to see it. His willingness to send Jesus Christ his Son to the cross is no different. God has acted for our sake.

So why the cross? Why did he have to die? If we remember even farther back into Genesis to the story in the garden where the man and woman eat from the forbidden tree, we remember that doing so brought about death. Not immediately and not just death for their physical bodies, but death for their souls.

When God moves to the cross – when Jesus gives up his last breath saying, “Into your hands I commit my spirit (my life)” – he's setting up the victory. In order to conquer death, you have to meet death. In order to conquer our death, Jesus became one of us in order to die our death. His resurrection is the victory but resurrection only applies to the dead.

God moved toward the cross, so that our lives might be filled today. God moved to the cross so that our physical death might be meaningless. As St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:54, “When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’”

We don't have to wait. We can claim it now. That's what Paul meant in that passage from Philippians that we heard today. That when we empty ourselves of our attachments to the things of the world that keep us from God, that when we are willing to let Christ's mind of service to others for their sake even when they don't appreciate it, that when we live with such an abandon that physical death isn't even one of our considerations, that we get to live now.

And so, God moves toward the cross, this Holy Week. Our worship won't end in a few minutes. Holy Week is just that a holy WEEK of worship. God doesn't leave us hanging on our fears. He stays with us for the victory. He moves toward the cross to go through it. Our opportunities this week, to gather for remembering his last night with his disciples and the horror of his death help us to claim that victory, to claim the victory that is life –transformative life – eternal life – not just for eternity to come – but for eternity now.

Will we choose to move with God toward the cross as witnesses to his glory? AMEN.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nL5TAiYjSu4>