

Sermon 1 Why Did Jesus Have to Die? A Required Sacrifice (Substitutionary Atonement)

Good Friday, April 2, 2021

Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22; Hebrews 10:16—25; John 18:19-42

Why did Jesus have to die?

Do you ever listen to the lessons in worship and find yourself arguing with them? Maybe it's a sense that you just don't understand... Where did that come from? ...Do I really believe that?

Tonight, we are going to listen very carefully to the texts, each in turn. We're going to walk through them, conversationally, not interacting with every verse, necessarily, but speaking back to what we seem to be hearing.

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Isaiah 52:13--53:12

¹³*See, my servant shall prosper;
he shall be exalted and lifted up,
and shall be very high.*

This is God speaking through the psalmist. God is inviting us to watch and to listen. God is going to reveal to us what will happen to a particular servant. If the Divine were pointing to a servant in the prophet's own time or in the immediate future, that servant was not named specifically, but was known generically as "the Suffering Servant." However, since the time of Jesus, centuries later, the servant has been recognized by believers as Jesus, the Christ. In that light, tonight, we also will name this servant to be Christ.

So, the Divine points to Christ and says, "Behold, my servant shall prosper." But there is some irony in this, because it is true that Christ will be lifted up... when he is raised on a cross. But it is definitely not a prospering, nor an exaltation. At least not at the beginning. Not on that horrible Friday. Perhaps later, when believers recognize the gift, the meaning, the grace of this action, then we can exalt Christ, lifting him up in praise and thanksgiving. But we get ahead of ourselves...

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¹⁴*Just as there were many who were astonished at him*

Astonished? To say the least. What could people have thought as they watched this spectacle of execution? This man had been beaten. He was wearing a crown of thorns. Nothing else. A sign over his head read "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." If anyone had witnessed his miracles; if anyone had attended any of his teachings; if anyone had honored his entrance into Jerusalem as king- just how many days ago? - they would be shocked – horrified – mortified! However, if these spectators were soldiers or part of the cohort who had a hand in his arrest, mock trial and execution, they would be smug.

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¹⁵*so he shall startle many nations;*

Seeing is not believing. But the visage of this beaten, crucified man turns us inside out. No one looking at him can ignore him. One cannot remain unaffected.

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*15:2b he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.*

³He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;

This man was no Daniel Craig or Sean Connery or any of the other men declared by the tabloids to be the most desirable man of the year. He was no one. He could be anyone. He could have been everyone.

He was not the usual choice for a sacrificial lamb, a lamb perfect, without blemish.

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⁴*Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted*

He is dust. Like any one of us. He has embraced our flesh and embraced our suffering. And we assume that because he suffers as we do, he must be afflicted by God. Isn't God behind all suffering? Doesn't sufferings happen as a punishment from God, or at least as part of God's plan?

That's what we say when we ask, "What have I done to deserve this? ... Why me?" That is what we say as we try to encourage someone else in suffering when we say, "This will turn out. This is God's plan... Everything happens for a reason..."

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⁵*But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed...*

The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

But it is not his fault! He has done nothing to deserve this. He is wounded because of our transgressions. He is dying in our place, because of our sin. We should be there on that cross, not him!

This is God's will. We have offended God. God is holy and righteous, and because we have sinned against the Divine, we owe God. A life for a life.

And somehow his death cleans the slate. Somehow his death heals us. He is like the ancient scapegoat. The ancient ones would rub their hands on the goat, transferring their guilt and shame upon the creature. Then the goat would be driven into the wilderness to be devoured by the wild animals.

This man on the cross is our scapegoat. We no longer keep that practice, but we know how blame can be projected onto another person, another class, another nation. It's not our fault. We are free.

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*⁷He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.*

How would he take this? What is his response? He would not resist. He would not argue. He would not justify or explain.

As we read the passion story tonight, observe how Jesus accepts what is being done to him.

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⁸By a perversion of justice he was taken away.

But wait! Something is wrong. Something does not fit. This is not the fulfillment of justice; it is a perversion of justice. This is not supposed to happen!

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*For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.*

A perversion of justice. Yet his death is still justified as necessary for the sake of the people. That is what Caiaphas asserted when he said, "It is better that one man should die than all the people"!

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*¹⁰Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain.
When you make his life an offering for sin,*

Why would God want this? Why would God allow this? Why would God not stop it? Especially if it is a perversion of justice?

Jesus died for our sins? Jesus took our place. That's what we have been taught. But it is more complicated than substituting a dove for a child or a bull for a family. There is something more complicated here than the Savior absorbing our punishment so we might be absolved.

This is seeming to be more like a visit from a Dickensian Christmas ghost saying "Behold my servant... Pay attention!"

We do not yet have an answer.

We move on...

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Psalm 22 (What follows will have to be modified if the psalm is not used or is not read as a chorus of voices)

¹*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

²*My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer;
by night, but I find no rest.*

Who has not said something like this at one time or another?

Jesus himself cried out these words! Did Jesus feel like he too had been abandoned by God? Had his resolve to accept the hour that had come... had the commitment to drink from the cup that was before him... faltered?

But when we cry out like this, is it not a reflection more on our own weakness, than a complaint against God?

As this psalm was read tonight as a chorus of voices, we hear portrayed the universality of pain. And in pain we cry to God. But if God does not answer, or if God is slow in answering, then there must be something wrong with God, not ourselves. God is unjust. God is capricious. God is indifferent. Or God is just mean!

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³*Yet you are the Holy One,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.*

⁴*Our ancestors put their trust in you,
they trusted, and you rescued them.*

⁵*They cried out to you and were delivered;
they trusted in you and were not put to shame.*

No, the fault is not in God. The Divine has promised to claim God's people, provide for God's people, protect God's people, deliver God's people!

"The fault is not in our stars but in ourselves."

Yes, cry out to God. Yes, give voice to your pain, your need. But do not despair or get angry; that is a lack of faith. That's what people say. That's what the advisors said to Job when Job complained. He was showing a lack of faith. He was being dishonest about his innocence.

And when Job challenged God directly and insisted on a confrontation... that God give Job an explanation, God said in reply, "Job, who do you think you are? Where were you when I created all this?"

People say we should have "the faith of Job", but it appears those people haven't read the book! Job took God on! Or maybe, that takes more faith than being quiet, a different kind of faith.

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⁷*All who see me laugh me to scorn;
they curl their lips; they shake their heads.*
⁸*"Trust in the LORD; let the LORD deliver;
let God rescue him if God so delights in him."*

Confusing, isn't it? There is not enough compassion in the world. You suffer and someone wants to explain it away. You suffer and someone wants to say it is all part of God's great plan. (Sure a good thing for them that they are not in it) You suffer and get mad and you are accused of not having faith. You raise your voice or your fist, calling for justice and you are accused of being violent, a "protestor," a "terrorist."

You suffer and people ignore you. Or they laugh at you. "Where is your God now?" "Let us see if God will rescue you if you mean so much!"

There were those who said that very thing to Jesus. There he was dying unfairly, in a perversion of justice, and they said mockingly, "Let's see if God will save you now." And they said, "You could save others, Bigshot. Save yourself!"

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¹⁸*They divide my garments among them;
for my clothing they cast lots.*

And they divided Jesus' clothes among themselves and cast lots for his robe.

Did you notice how Psalm 22 ends? We have this chorus of voices all in need, all crying to God, all suffering because God seems far off.... But something happens. And then all... each one... has a change of voice. Now they will add their praise to the praise of their ancestors. Now God has done something to prove presence, compassion, deliverance and justice.

God does rule the nations. All dominion does belong to God. All things are in God's hands. Our ancestors saw it. These voices see it. And their descendants to come will see it too!

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³⁰*Their descendants shall serve the LORD,
whom they shall proclaim to generations to come.*

³¹*They shall proclaim God's deliverance to a people yet unborn,
saying to them, "The LORD has acted!"*

There is a lot of crying out in this world. There are the voices that cry out in defiance. There are voices that claim a certain knowledge or status or power. What they say goes. No matter who should suffer. They will build walls and shout at those on the other side to keep out, while those on the other side cry, "Let us in!" And supporters on one side will cry, "Build the wall higher, deeper, longer!" While others cry, "These walls are an abomination! Tear them down!"

And while all this is happening, other voices simply cry, "Give us a place to sleep!.... Please, feed my baby!"

There's a lot of noise in this world. And a lot of silence. This good Friday night there is a lot of noise.

"You are one of them!"

"No, I am not"

"Who are you?"

"Don't you know who I am; what I can do?"

"Do you want me to release your king?"

"Crucify him!"

"Give us Barabbas!"

"You, there! Carry his cross!"

And there are words that almost go unheard: "I thirst.... Here is your Mother.... It is finished...." And from the lips of a soldier who had a change of heart, "Truly this is the Son of God."

Noise.... And whispers.... And a profound silence that follows ... one day... two days.... three days.... Until God has the last word...

Confusing, isn't it?

And we read in Hebrews....

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Hebrews 10:16-25

¹⁶*“This is the covenant that I will make with them
after those days, says the Lord:
I will put my laws in their hearts,
and I will write them on their minds,”*

¹⁷*he also adds,
“I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.”*

¹⁸*Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin*

We have a lot of questions, don't we? We make a lot of noise. But better to raise our voices and cry out our needs and ask our questions, even beating on the chest of Jesus if we need to. At least then we are still in relationship.

Then we empty our hearts.... and make room for good news.

Why does Jesus have to die? It's hard to explain. It's hard to accept. What matters is what happens afterward.

God announces a new covenant. Not like the covenant made with our ancestors. That was a good one. This one is stronger.

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***“This is the covenant that I will make with them
after those days, says the Lord:
I will put my laws in their hearts,
and I will write them on their minds,”***

“I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.”

¹⁸***Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.***

Where there is forgiveness, no offering, no sacrifice is necessary. Sacrifice does not buy forgiveness. Sacrifice is still made, but no longer because it is required. Sacrifice is made because now it is a joy and a delight. Now sacrifice is made because now it is participation in the wonderful giving from life on behalf of life.

There was a time when no one but the high priest could enter into the sanctuary, and then only once a year. To do so at any other time, or for anyone else to step there, was certain death. Now the curtain is torn in two. Nothing stands between us and God.

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¹⁹*Therefore, my friends,*

Notice, we are no longer creatures, no longer subjects, no longer slaves... we are friends. Friends of God. And more than that, we are children of God. And because we are children – daughters and sons, brothers and sisters, we are all heirs of God's inheritance.

Our cry, “Lord, have mercy!” has become, “Our Lord has had mercy” and “Our Father is having mercy!”

So then,

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since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus,²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain....²² let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

We are cleansed. Not just a little bit. More than sprinkled. More than washed. We are purified. Not by punishment. Not even by our sacrifices. We have been purged, as though by fire. Melted down and made new. We have been molded, still in dust. But now the dust of the stars!

My God, what do we do now?

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let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds.... but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Let us help one another to love and good deeds.... Let us encourage one another, embracing all creation as Christ has embraced all creation, whether in joys or sorrows.

You see, tonight we still step with Christ into the unknown, into the darkness. And we step into this time of profound silence. Tonight, everything seems to be chaos, without form and void. We've been here before. Tonight, this is not the ending. This is the beginning.

And in the beginning God said, "Let there be...."

This is God's last word. This is God's first word, "Let there be..."