

Beneath the Cross

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Texts: John 3: 1-17

So, here's what I could do right now. I could talk about how and why I think this passage, especially John 3:16 has become a cultural icon, seen on billboards, bumper stickers and body tattoos and on signs in sports stadiums all around our country. I could talk about why Martin Luther described these verses as the "gospel in miniature" some 500 years ago. I could talk about the history of interpretation and misinterpretation of these utterly vexing-for-many-of-us lines and phrases. These are all sermons for another day, and I've preached one or two of them on this text before. For today, allow me to sound out just a few notes about the text, and then shift my focus to something that I hope might offer us all some solace and comfort after what has been another very trying week. I know hearts are tender now. Many are feeling unsettled to say the least by the spread of the coronavirus and the widespread economic and systemic disruption that is coming with it. Many are also feeling bereft, at a deep level, that our neighbor Elizabeth Warren has stepped out of the democratic primary. In all of it, we really don't know what comes next. Many of us can use an anchor right now, something to hold onto, something to lift us up. I hear ya! I'll return to where I think many of our hearts are, but first, our text. Then a quick story. Then a testimony of a sort.

Starting with the text. First, notice the dimensions of earth and heaven here. Nicodemus and the rest of us are clearly earth-bound in our efforts to understand who Jesus is and why he is here. We don't get it. Not at first. He and we come to Jesus in the night, looking through the darkness of our questions and confusion. We have to be born from above to see God's kingdom? What does that mean?

What's more, there's a connection here between the Hebrew Bible and the Gospel. Did you hear it in John 3:14 and 15. "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." And then the kicker, John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." Trying to understand this text without reference to the Hebrew Bible is like trying to drive in Brookline or JP without GPS! There's no grid. All horse tracks! You had to have lived there, at least once!

For one thing, the language of "God giving up his son" would have evoked for first century listeners the story of Abraham's almost-sacrifice of Isaac. God's love and devotion to us is like that, John seems to be saying! I'll leave it at that for now. And then we see Moses lifting up the serpent? This refers to a story in Numbers 21 where God grows impatient for a time and sends a plague of snakes upon Israelites in the wilderness who were grumbling against God. Until Moses prayed for his people. And then God said "Ok. Well take one of those serpents and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." 9 So Moses made a serpent of bronze and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and lived". Are you catching the parallel? The serpent on a pole? Jesus on a cross? John's passage seems to be saying that the cross is not merely an artifact of human violence but something "lifted up," maybe even exposed, by God. Both symbols, the serpent and the cross, are emblematic of the reality of human waywardness. The reality of our human sin and human suffering and human pain and human brokenness is being lifted up and transformed so as to bring new life.

I realize I'm moving quickly here. Believe me, we could take a lot more time with this text. What interests me most for today though is the way that this text, without mentioning the cross, is all about Jesus crucifixion and rising, and God's abiding love through it all. The gospel in miniature, indeed. Yet, we too may need to be somehow born anew, born from the Spirit, to be able to understand.

You see, there's a fascinating theology of the cross evoked here. It's not the confusing and I would say woefully misguided idea that Jesus absorbs punishment on our behalf, "saving us from our sins." It's not the theory that Christ crucified somehow conquers the powers of death. Theologians call that idea "Christus Victor." As one commentator has said, referring to our passage: "Think of it this way: the bronze serpent takes what was for the wandering Israelites one of the very worst things in the world (a lethal snake) and remakes it into one of the very best (an instrument of healing). [Similarly], the Christian cross can be understood as an imperial weapon of torture and death [and yet] is divinely remade into a sign of hope and new life, a sword transformed into a ploughshare. Viewed this way, the cross is a poetic proclamation: God is turning the world around, redeeming even the worst of the worst, swords into ploughshares, serpents into salves, crosses into trees of life - making all things new!" Can you see it? Just as Moses lifted up the serpent, so must the Son of Man be lifted up! On the Cross. For God so loved the world!"

Here's the brief story. This past Wednesday night, about a dozen of us gathered down the street at the parsonage. Without really noting it as such, we did what Christians have been doing for over two thousand years. We turned our attention for a time from worldly affairs, in this case from Super Tuesday and the coronavirus. Instead, we broke bread together, we shared conversation and we remembered Jesus. As some of you know, we've been reading together this Lent James Cone's powerful book called the "Cross and the Lynching Tree." The Lynching tree is yet another symbol of brutal lethality, an instrument of racial terror that wreaked trauma and havoc on African American communities in this country, especially in the decades between 1880 and 1940. We spoke a bit about the book, but our conversation was far more about the cross itself. I set a small bronze crucifix on the table and invited people to lift it up, hold it and share what it meant to them. We went around the room. It was an intimate, profound and quite beautiful conversation. People shared stories and questions and ideas.

And here's the testimony, only some of which I shared on Wednesday. Setting aside scripture and "academic" theology, here's some of what the cross has come to mean to me.

For many years, the cross was all mystery and confusion for me. Sometimes, it was a downer! I remember a Maundy Thursday service when I was about 16 or so. My dad was still the minister of our church even though she was just starting to lose his battle with prostate cancer. Like we do here, at the end of our candlelit tenebrae, the lights went all the way down until the sanctuary was pitch black. Driving home that night with my dad and mom, I remember telling them that I pretty much hated the service. It was dark and scary and sad and confusing, and yes, I knew part of my reaction was because my dad was dying. So, I avoided the cross. Or tried to for a time. The thing is, in case you haven't noticed, these things aren't just in churches. They are everywhere in our culture. And sometimes obnoxiously unavoidable.

It's still a symbol of mystery for me though now I've grown to see the confusion, the questions, and even the sadness, as part and parcel of my faith journey. Still, in college, I joined most of my ultra-

liberal peers in thinking that the cross and Christ were mostly just symbols of exclusion, signs that only the true believers belonged. I pointed my finger at those other Christians, the conservative evangelicals or fundamentalists, who were blowing it for the rest of us. At the same time, I was a white kid from the suburbs of upstate New York encountering the highly multicultural curriculum and campus of Wesleyan University. I couldn't help but notice that many poor, black and Latin American folk, and even some hardcore feminists and gay people, were finding in Jesus and the cross a symbol of solidarity with their own struggles and suffering. I started to understand the cross as a site of profound solidarity and also of the courage to not back down.

A few years later, I was staying near a monastery off the coast of Scotland. I came upon a street vendor who selling what I thought were small misshapen wooden cross. A sign above it read: hand crosses. \$5. I didn't know what a hand cross was until I picked it up and it fit into my hand. That was the point of it. It's odd shape and soft and sanded down edges made for easy holding! And so, the cross also became for me, and still is, a tool of meditation and prayer. As I held it and turned it over and let myself hold the mystery of it, and the solidarity and the courage, Jesus, something began to open inside of me. The cross began to hold me and hold my heart. Rather than merely seeing Jesus as a historical figure, I came to find a Christ that was at work within me, a silent voice of that would accept me and all my many flaws whenever I couldn't do it by myself. When I can remember it, when I can hold it in my hand or in my mind, that softer sided cross took and still takes some of the edge away when I get too sure of my judgments of myself and others. When I find myself aware of the different parts of me, the different faces I show to the world, the Sunday morning minister guy, the Sunday evening couch-potato guy, the woefully impatient driver guy, the super wordy can't shut up guy, the quiet guy, I think of Jesus at the center of them all, maybe nudging me towards some and away from others, but at bottom, loving and befriending them all, and inviting me to do the same.

When I gaze upon the cross now, sometimes even that big giant honking one right up there, these are just some the places where my mind and soul goes. It's complicated. These days, at the cross, I'm also learning to surrender my striving and my self-sufficiency, my needs to be good and my needs to be right, even my deeply felt need to feel needed and to feel helpful. I'm just starting to learn these things, ok. I'm like a kindergartner with this stuff, or maybe back in high school, which reminds me...

After a week like this, where I've felt it all, especially the sad, scared, angry, confused, bereft, sometimes in solidarity, sometimes courageous, sometimes hopeful and faithful, but more of the time anxiety prone and selfish, toggling between screens, scanning for news of more bad news on one, desperately trying to find hand sanitizer on the other, for me and my family let alone for the rest of us...after a week like this, what the cross is for me and I hope for you too, is an invitation to be present. Our faith teaches us that God does not turn away from any aspect of human suffering. God shows us a way through it. When we lift up the cross, just like Moses did with that serpent, all of our brokenness and sorrow and selfishness and despair, all of our sometimes snake-like and scapegoating ways are exposed, and yet lifted up and transformed into something greater! And paradoxically, turning to the cross, turning to God in Christ, being present to current and past suffering allows God to be present us. Turning to the cross makes space for God to enter into our stories and show us the way forward. As our shared story goes, Jesus did not rise from that first century lynching tree, with vengeance, venom or judgement. Instead, he returned with greetings and signs of peace, with invitations to break bread even with the one who betrayed him. By his model of love, he invites us simply to be and be present in the face of all the mystery, sadness and confusion, but be present and let God be present to us. Rather than get lost in the what ifs of tomorrow or next week or next month or next November, what can we do

today? A simple suggestion considers the cross, as an anchor, something to hold onto. Whether in your hands, mind or heart, it's something to hold onto, that we can be present to ourselves and others and that God can continue to be present to us. Amen.



