

*If Jesus Didn't Die for Our Sins, then
Why Did He Die?*

A horrific chemical weapons attack in Syria. A subway bombing in Russia. A truck attack on shoppers in Sweden. And just this morning, two Coptic Christian churches in Egypt were bombed during Palm Sunday worship services. And less sensational, but just as deadly, U.S. bombs and drone strikes continue to kill unarmed civilians throughout the Middle East.

Our hearts break as we hear these stories. And we wonder what we can do to help heal this broken world.

And at the same time, outside my living room window there is a pink dogwood tree in full bloom. Right next to it on the fence is a beautiful purple potato vine. And as I walk around I see brilliant red and yellow freesia, and bright pink azaleas, delicate purple iris, and everywhere, those cheerful orange California poppies and fields bursting with yellow mustard. Lovely.

And now, baseball season has begun! The Giants aren't exactly off to a great start, but at least the Warriors are playing very well as they head into the playoffs.

And today is Palm Sunday. Later this week we will celebrate Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. And then, it will be Easter.

Oh, I love this time of year. It's so full of hope and promise.

And I love the Jesus Story itself - this poignant and powerful story that we re-tell every spring, at the turn of the seasons.

Every year, after bud break, when the trees have leafed out and the flowers are in bloom, we recount the Palm Sunday story of Jesus of Galilee - who up till now had done his whole ministry out in the hinterlands. But on this day, he arrived, at last, in the capitol city, the Holy City of Jerusalem, for the most important Jewish festival of the year: Passover.

He made a triumphant entry amid waving palm branches and shouts of "Hosanna!" However, that was immediately followed by conflict, mostly initiated by Jesus himself: first driving out the money-changers in the temple, and then arguing with the scribes and Pharisees. And then he stuck his finger in the eye of the Roman authorities as well.

Soon, they'd all had enough of him. After celebrating Passover on Thursday evening with his close friends and allies, Jesus was arrested. And on Friday the Romans tortured him, and then executed him in a barbaric way: nailing him to a cross. The life and the teachings of this wonderful human being came to a sudden, tragic end.

However - Praise God! - that was not the end of the story. And we will gather here again next Sunday to celebrate the beauty and the mystery of resurrection, and the ultimate triumph of life over death, and love over hate.

The Easter Story is a great story. And it's our story: a story of hope and triumph that is at the heart of the Christian faith.

And yet.... And yet, I also have some problems with this story, as you may have surmised from the sermon title today. (!) Or maybe my issue is not with the Easter Story

itself, but with how it has been interpreted and understood through the years. So, I want to invite you to join me today in taking a closer look.

In a recent sermon, Pastor Curran quoted the great Hindu spiritual leader, Sai Baba of Shirdi, who said that one should not speak until they ask themselves four questions, "Is what I am about to say kind?" "Is it true?" "Is it necessary?" And, my personal favorite, "Does it improve upon the silence?"

I only wish that our President had these questions on a plaque sitting on his desk - or wherever he is - when he sends out those late-night tweets!

Is it kind? It is true? Is it necessary? And, does it improve upon the silence?

Well, friends, my hope is that my message today might at least improve upon the thunderous silence that surrounds one of the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith: namely, that Christ died for our sins.

Now, I'm not sure how many of us believe this anymore, or even understand what it means. It's certainly this is not something we progressive Christians talk about.

Where did this doctrine come from? My guess is that it started with the need in the Early Church to explain why Jesus, the Son of God, had such a brief career, and died so young.

After all, this is in stark contrast to other great spiritual leaders, like Abraham, Moses, King David - all of whom lived to a ripe old age. The founder of Buddhism, Siddhartha Gautama, lived well into his 80's. Islam's founder, the Prophet Mohammed, had an especially productive and long life.

So why did Jesus die so young?

Well, the church has provided a variety of answers over the years. One traditional view is that it all happened according to some Divine Plan for Salvation. Thus, it was "God's Will" that Jesus suffer and die on the cross.

To me, this idea is not credible because it's based on a concept of God as Puppet Master, who pulls the strings and causes people to act, or causes things to happen in a certain way, according to his will. I just don't think most of us believe in a manipulative God who moves us around like pieces on a chess board.

But even more troublesome, for me, is this idea that Jesus died for our sins. In other words, it's our fault. It is our sinful nature, that made necessary the untimely death of this extraordinary young man.

The theological term is "substitutionary atonement." Substitutionary atonement. The idea is that God demanded that somebody suffer, somebody had to be punished, before God would be able to forgive us.

Thus, Jesus stands in for us, and receives the brutal punishment that we so richly deserve, because of our sin.

To me, this is based on an old-fashioned view of God as a vengeful God who required that someone suffer physical violence and death - somebody had to pay a Big Price - before God could be loving and forgiving.

This "Jesus died for our sins" language is everywhere: in our liturgy, our prayers, our hymns. One classic formulation is the Agnus Dei, which describes Jesus as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world."

One of the favorite hymns for Holy Week says, "What wondrous love is this, that Christ should come in bliss, to bear the heavy cross for my soul, for my soul."

Now, to be sure, I believe in the wondrous love of Christ. I would even say that I have experienced that love in my own spiritual journey. I just don't think Jesus had to "bear the cross to save my soul."

So, what I want to suggest to you this morning is that, when you think about it, it just doesn't make sense to say that a loving and compassionate God required the violent, bloody, premature death of Jesus in order for us to receive God's grace and forgiveness.

Which leaves us then, with the question: If Jesus didn't die for our sins, then why did he die, so young, and in such cruel fashion?

Now, I want to suggest that this is a really important question for us to be wrestling with right now. And I do mean us - you and me - this congregation, at this very moment, as we go about the task of designing a new cross that will be the focal point of our newly-remodeled sanctuary.

What is the meaning of Christ's death? And thus, what kind of meaning do we attach to the cross?

A few years ago, two excellent Biblical scholars, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, came out with a provocative book entitled, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach Us about Jesus' Final Days*.

Borg and Crossan suggest that there may well have been two grand entrances into Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday. Jesus and his disciples came from the Mount of Olives, so they would have entered Jerusalem from the east.

But the much grander of the two parades would have been the one that came from the west. This was a grand imperial parade, featuring Pontius Pilate, with marching soldiers and military cavalcades. You see, Pilate probably spent most of his time on the sea coast, where it was more pleasant (think Mar-a-Lago). But for a big festival, like Passover, Pilate would make a big show of coming to Jerusalem, with all the might of the Roman Empire, prepared to put down any trouble that might arise.

So, imagine Pilate, in all his pomp and glory, entering Jerusalem on one side of the city, while Jesus entered from the other side, riding on a donkey. And as we read today from the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus must have pre-arranged this donkey, since he told the disciples just where to find it.

In fact, Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem perhaps was not spontaneous at all, but instead was a carefully-orchestrated counter-demonstration. Perhaps Jesus planned this humble, alternative, procession, in order to make a political statement about the difference between his power, and the power of the Empire: his power of love and justice and compassion, versus the power of coercion and fear and violence.

And, it worked! Jesus made an impression.

And it may well be that the very next thing Jesus did - overturning tables and driving the money-changers out of the temple - was likewise a planned political demonstration. Jesus surely knew that the tradesmen and the money-changers would be right back at it the next day. But he wanted to make a statement, and stir people up. Which he did!

Now, if you are unconvinced about the political nature of Jesus' actions, just consider this for a moment: Jesus could have preached about the "Family of God" or the "Community of God." But he didn't. Instead, Jesus coined a new term, "The Kingdom of God." And when you think about it, "Kingdom of God" is a political term, designed to provoke earthly kings, and to challenge their legitimacy.

So, what I am suggesting is that Jesus was, in fact, a political activist, and he came to Jerusalem determined to challenge the Roman system of oppression and tyranny. He

was also angry at the Jewish leaders of the Temple, because they were in cahoots with the Romans! They had been had been co-opted by the Empire.

But let's be clear on this one point: the Jews did not kill Jesus. After all, first century Jews were an oppressed people themselves; they were powerless. It was only the Romans who had the power to arrest people and to execute those whom they considered to be a political threat.

So then, why did Jesus die? Well, as I said, I'm convinced that Jesus didn't have to die in order to enact some great divine plan for salvation. And I'm not at all sure that he intended to die. However, once Jesus boldly and openly criticized the ruling powers, and demanded justice, I suppose it became inevitable that he would die.

I believe Jesus died because he was a threat to the Roman Empire. He died because of his politics, and his outspoken critique of the domination system.

Make no mistake: Jesus was an authoritative, authentic, God-filled, charismatic leader. His passion and courage might well have led to revolution or, at least, to widespread subversive activities - if the Empire had not risen up and crushed him.

The great irony, of course, is that they didn't crush Jesus. Not by a long shot. The Powers That Be may have killed him, but they did not defeat him. The power and influence of Jesus continue to this day. In fact, the only reason we even remember somebody like Pontius Pilate is because of the small role he had in the hero story of Jesus Christ.

Thus, for me, the cross symbolizes the passion for justice, and the courage that it takes to speak truth to power. The cross of Jesus is above all a symbol of resistance. It's a call to arms, a call to fight for what we believe in. The cross is a reminder to you and me that we, too, are called to join the struggle for justice, peace, and freedom for all.

And, at the same time, the cross is a symbol of life, of resurrection, and of the ultimate triumph of good over evil, and of hope over despair.

You know, some people say that "The Church" should not be involved in politics. And maybe that's true; I don't know. But what I DO know is that Christian people, we who follow Jesus, must be involved in politics. We must do our part to help heal this broken world.

We who follow Jesus cannot stand by, and let our Latino brothers and sisters, and our Muslim brothers and sisters, be intimidated, and mistreated, and have their loved ones deported.

We cannot stand by and watch as social programs designed for the most vulnerable among us are dismantled and defunded.

We dare not stand idly by while our mother earth is mindlessly exploited and degraded, as we go on pretending that a rapidly changing climate will not have grave consequences.

We who follow Jesus cannot allow our legal systems and our prison systems to perpetuate the lie that black lives do not matter as much as white lives. And by the same token, we cannot stand by while rural whites in this country fall prey to opioid addiction, depression, and other social ills.

And we who follow the Prince of Peace cannot stand by quietly while war rages throughout the Middle East, and our own nation drops ever-more bombs, and rattles more swords, and grows more militaristic by the day.

Dear friends, Jesus calls us to be passionate for justice. Christ calls you and me to confront the powers of this world; to not be compliant nor complacent; but instead, to hold fast to the dream of the Kingdom of God – a vision of peace and justice for all.

May each one of us find a way to answer that call, and help to heal this broken world. For Jesus' sake. Amen.