

GOD IS A GIVER

ISAIAH 52:18-53:12; LUKE 23:13-24:11

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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For two thousand years, people have been trying to explain what happened on the cross.

For two thousand years, writers and theologian and biblical scholars have sacrificed forests of trees in attempts to explain exactly what happened on that awful Friday so many years ago.

We have many ideas—each with some measure of biblical support.

- the cross was Jesus taking the penalty that our sins deserved
- the cross was where God, in Christ, delivered the decisive blow to cosmic evil, to death, and to the devil—where Christ was victorious over all that holds us captive
- the cross was the supreme example of self-sacrifice for us to follow
- the cross is a powerful demonstration of God's solidarity with the victims of our world, with the poor and the oppressed and the marginalized; it is God himself as victim

I have half a shelf of books in my office devoted to figuring out which of these metaphors or which *combination* of metaphors most accurately describes what was going on that first Good Friday. Which ones deserve to be emphasized? How should we calibrate our understanding? What does one have to believe about this cross in order to be saved?

But after dwelling with this story throughout this week, and after hearing it again this morning, I think that the best place to begin is simply to acknowledge that the execution of Jesus of Nazareth on a Roman cross, and the role this plays in the salvation and healing of the world, and the establishing of God's kingdom is a **deep and profound mystery**—a mystery whose depths we will never fully plumb.

The best place to begin is simply with reverence and with awe at the sight of the creator of the universe willingly subjecting himself to a barbaric execution at the hands of the very human beings that were created to reflect the divine image.

This week, I came across these wise quotes from Thomas Yoder Neufeld in his book *Killing Enmity*:

*Since New Testament writers view the death of Jesus as taking place within an unfolding story full of surprises, the New Testament does not contain a theory of the atonement, let alone theories of atonement. We find, rather, metaphors and scriptural connections and allusions that point, after the fact, to how it could possibly be that the scene of humanity's worst crime could also be the moment of God's reconciling embrace of precisely that hostile humanity. The various metaphors are a way of naming the surprise of grace.*¹

This morning I want us to resist the urge to explain and apply the cross—at least for a while.

I want us to begin by focusing less on what the cross *accomplishes* than simply looking on this event itself as a human story.

We just heard the story of Jesus' life and death told in tandem. I wanted us to hear this as a reminder that before any of the theorizing and theologizing about what this event means for us, the cross is part of the story of a human life, a particular story, in the context of a particular people and a particular hope.

So often, I think, particularly in the North American Christian context, we are guilty of viewing the cross as the outworking of some kind of abstract atonement theology that describes why the cross was “necessary” and how it “works,” how it moves human beings from the “guilty” to the “not guilty” column in God's ledger.

So many presentations of the cross leave one with the impression that it would have been sufficient if any kind of divine-human hybrid being would have died (it doesn't

¹ Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, *Killing Enmity: Violence and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 85.

² Adam Phillips, *Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life* (London: Hamish

really matter where or when) in order to kick start the mechanism whereby human sin could be judged, where we could be offered forgiveness and salvation.

All of that other stuff about Jesus becomes almost incidental. Sure, it's interesting that he was born in the first century, that he was a member of the Jewish people, that he did some miracles, and taught some wonderful things, but all of this is kind of secondary to the really important thing: the cross.

This is where the important spiritual things take place.

We have images of the eternal Son of God, the second member of the Trinity, the risen and exalted Lord in our heads as we see Jesus on the cross, but we forget that he was a son, a brother, a friend.

Jesus was fully God *and* fully human, according to the great creeds of the church. We sometimes forget the fully human part.

I would like us to dwell just a bit with the human tragedy of this story.

I would like us to think not of the usual divinely-authored, salvation-accomplishing, prophecy-fulfilling story of Jesus' death, but of the *human* story behind those awful events that took place outside Jerusalem two thousand or so Fridays ago.

I want us to think about all the political manipulation, all the religious groping and grasping after power and status, of the human betrayal.

I want us to think of how this Jesus must have seemed not to comfortable postmodern westerners like us, but to his first-century contemporaries... Not the second person of the Trinity or our "personal Lord and Saviour," but an enigmatic revolutionary, a strangely compelling religious teacher who threatened the powers and structures and institutions of his day.

I want us to think of a very sad story—of a young man wrongfully accused, falsely tried and convicted... of a horrific and barbaric execution... of how there is so much violence in our world... has *always* been so much violence...

I want us to think about a brokenhearted mother and a son gone too soon... about confused and shattered disciples of another failed Messiah... of a beleaguered,

harassed, confused group of occupied people who were caught between the oppression of the Roman Empire and the hope of their people that was never supposed to turn out this way...

I want us to dwell with the sadness and the badness of this human story before we ever move on to what is all accomplished.

[Pause.]

But after doing this, I also want us to ask the question: *What do these strange events that comprise this sad story have to do with me? With us?*

That we affix the adjective “good” to this Friday could surely be seen as among the more perverse ironies of history. These events are not “good,” in any normal sense of the word, even for those who have an eye on the Sunday coming.

We still stubbornly call it “Good Friday,” though, perhaps because from that terrible first Friday down to today, there has always been a sense that there is more to the story than the sadness and the badness that we see on the human level.

There has always been a sense that, while the story of Jesus’ last hours is a profoundly human story, it is more than this as well. However partially we understand or embrace it, we are convinced that the God of the universe was somehow at work amidst all of this tragedy and evil and apathy and betrayal and confusion and tears and rage and emptiness and despair.

The Christian conviction has always been that the story of the execution of a young Jewish rabbi by the collusion of religion and Empire is only *part* of the story—that behind these events, God was at work judging and paying the price for human sin and rebellion, reconciling all things to himself.

The Christian conviction has always been that this Friday *changed* things. Big things. Cosmic things. Historical and social and spiritual and personal things. Somehow, this death was a turning point in history. Somehow this death has echoed down through the ages.

There is so much that we don’t understand about this death.

We so often confidently proclaim what this or that meant, why the cross had to happen, what it precisely accomplished, why God “had” to do it this way, what this all means for us and what we should do about it. We use impressive, theological words to describe it in order to keep the story manageable and safe, to make it look like we know what we’re talking about, to make it seem like God is as rational as we are, to make it seem like the cross is the result of a logical equation.

But it wasn’t. And it isn’t.

But the truth is that the horrible execution story we remember today is a story cloaked in mystery at every turn.

Glorious, frightful, beautiful, God-awful mystery.

And yet, we cannot shake the deep sense that this Friday mystery is a hopeful one, and that the God behind these mysterious events is a generous, merciful, self-emptying God.

We are convinced that these mysteries do, indeed, have something—*everything*, actually—to do with us, all these years later.

We may understand less than we think we do about the cross of Christ, but we understand enough to know that the badness and sadness of our stories is bound up with the badness and sadness of that first awful Friday.

And we know that somehow the cross is part of God doing something for the badness and the sadness that we could never do for ourselves—that the cross is not *just* a scene of injustice and suffering but also, incredibly, of the greatest VICTORY the world has ever known.

That’s why we call this Friday “good.”

I want us to sit with two things as we leave today, as we dwell with Jesus at the cross, as we do our best to just *sit with them* and not rush too quickly to the victory and hope of Easter Sunday.

1. The cross ought to make us shudder in horror at the brutality of Jesus’ death and the reality of human sin and evil that compelled him to give himself up like this.

The images from the passage Noreen read from Isaiah are particularly poignant

- his appearance marred beyond human semblance
- despised, rejected, like one from whom we hide our faces
- a “Man of Sorrows”
- “of no account”
- wounded for our transgressions
- oppressed and afflicted, like a lamb led to slaughter...
- the victim of a perversion of justice

I read a book this week that absolutely nothing to do with the cross or to Christianity in general (it was a book about social psychology) but which had a passage that stood out to me: “Our solutions tell us what our problems are.”²

When we look at the cross, we ought to pause and ask ourselves. What problem could have led to *that* solution?

We ought to be humbled by the weight of our sin and grieved by the manner in which we contribute to the brokenness of our world—not in a generic, comfortably abstract kind of way as is so often the case when we talk about “human sin,” but in a personal one.

As we affirmed in our Call to Worship earlier, “We all like sheep have gone astray...”

2. The cross ought to make us marvel at God’s love and his fidelity—for you and for me, individually and for the whole world.

The cross makes us grieve for our sin, but it also demonstrates the unfathomable love of God.

(We will sing about this after communion—How Deep the Father’s Love for Us)

The cross shows us the lengths that God will go to in order to mend the broken relationship between God and his creation.

Jesus loves me, this I know. The cross tells me so.

² Adam Phillips, *Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012), xvii

God loves us, and this love is perhaps nowhere more powerfully demonstrated than on a Roman cross at Calvary.

How do we respond? We come, we confess, we accept, we receive from this God.

We don't try to earn, because this is the kind of sacrifice that could never be earned. We don't try to justify or rationalize. We don't even convince ourselves that we must now try to emulate Jesus in his suffering.

The cross not a transaction or a deal to accept. It is a gift.

I close with a quote from Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf:

God hanging on the cross for the salvation of the world is not a negotiating God. On the cross, God is not setting up the terms of a contract that humanity needs to fulfill. God isn't saying: "I died for you, now you've got to do what I tell you to do." Instead, God is giving God's own self so that humanity may have life, and life abundant. God is not a negotiator. God is a giver.³

God is a giver.

Thanks be to God.

³ Miroslav Volf, *Against the Tide: Love in a Time of Petty Dreams and Persisting Enmities* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 8.