

THE GODLESSNESS OF THE CROSS

Isaiah 52:14, 53:2b-3; Mark 15:33-34, 37; Philippians 2:5-11

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, October 3, 2021, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. This is part of an ongoing sermon series “The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ.”¹

Isaiah 52:14, 53:2b-3

Just as there were many who were astonished at him—so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals...he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.

Mark 15:33-34, 37

When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?’ which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’...Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last.

Philippians 2:5-11

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

This is the second of several sermons, spread out this Fall, on the Crucifixion of Christ. As I said last week: My hope is that through the spiritual discipline of focusing on this *central* event, we will come away from this series – as we emerge from COVID – with a deeper understanding of the significance of the *death* of Christ, the role it plays in his *identity* as God-with-us, and the role it plays in our *faith*.

Today I want to focus on what at first glance may seem to be a distinction without a difference. It is the assertion that God’s purpose is revealed not only in the *fact* of the Messiah’s death, but more significantly in its *mode*: Crucifixion. As we look at the Crucifixion, we will be talking about the *shame* and *degradation* it entails, and we will even consider the possibility that the Crucifixion of Christ was *godless*.

Thus, this may be the darkest and most challenging of the sermons in the series, but my hope is that it will prepare us for the larger *hope* entailed in the death and resurrection of Christ as Father, Son, and Spirit for *all* the people of the world, *all* the time, ourselves included.

Let us pray: *God of Pulpit and Table, Word and Sacrament, grant me to speak with judgment and faithfulness concerning what I have received from those who have gone before me. Because you are the guide of wisdom*

¹ This sermon series is inspired and draws largely from the book by Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ*, published in 2015 by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

*and corrector of the wise, may the words I say and the way we receive them be ever subject to your abundant blessing and merciful correction. In the name of Christ I pray. Amen.*²

I.

Fleming Rutledge, the Episcopal theologian on whose work I am relying for this series, maintains that it is not so much the *fact* of Christ's death that is a scandal to Jews and Gentiles of his day, religious and secular people today, as it is the *mode* by which he died.³

When the Apostle Paul includes a tribute to Christ in the letter to the Philippians, he incorporates a hymn, a piece of poetry which probably circulated in the early church, part of which reads:

*...though [Christ] was in the form of God,
[he] did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death...*

This hymn acknowledges the *reality* of Jesus' death. Putting on our grammarian hats, we can see that the hymn ends quite nicely and symmetrically where we stopped reading it. But when Paul placed the hymn in his letter to the Philippians, he added a phrase that broke the symmetry of the hymn. After describing Christ as "obedient to the point of death," Paul added: "*even death on a cross.*" It is not just the *fact* of Christ's death that calls forth Paul's adoration, but also the *manner* of his death. "Even death *on a cross.*"⁴

**

In most of human history, people have been put to death by *legitimate* authorities for such things as murder, attempted insurrections or coups, mutiny at sea, blasphemy, corrupting the youth of society, or more recently terrorism. Normally such deaths – from Socrates to Joan of Arc, from Thomas More to Timothy McVeigh – are by the standards of execution relatively *quick* and *efficient*. Followers sometimes offer support and adulation. Nearly always the condemned person is given a final meal and offered the chance to speak. Though such executions clearly involve the taking of human life, they are often done with a relative degree of dignity and a quick end to the condemned.⁵

But in the Roman world *none* of this applied to Crucifixion.

- Whereas other forms of execution were applied to all classes of people; crucifixion was reserved for the lowest classes.
- It was never used on Roman citizens; but rather, it was normally reserved for slaves. Cicero referred to crucifixion as "the most extreme form of torture inflicted upon slaves."⁶

² Based on the Wisdom of Solomon 7:15.

³ Rutledge 72.

⁴ Rutledge 73.

⁵ Rutledge 73.

⁶ Rutledge 74-77.

**

Yesterday afternoon, Maggie and I stood in a nicely renovated wooden frame house on the Wye Plantation on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. We listened as historian David Blight described a child name Fred Bailey being dropped off outside the room in which we were standing by his grandmother in 1824, being told to play with some of the other children there, and then when his grandmother left suddenly realizing that he was to be an orphan. A few months later, Fred Bailey – who had not yet taken the name of Frederick Douglass – would be in the same room where we were standing when his master Aaron Anthony brought in a fifteen-year-old girl – who was Fred Bailey’s Aunt Hester and was also a slave – hoisted her onto a joist above her head and proceeded to beat her nearly to the point of death. He did not stop until *he* grew tired.⁷

Crucifixion, says Rutledge, was “taken for granted [among the Romans] as the method that would await *slaves* if they caused trouble.”⁸ No wonder theologian James Cone has written a book chillingly entitled *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*.⁹

**

Not only was Crucifixion “regarded as the most degrading kind of punishment [in antiquity],” but in in Israelite society as well. According to theologian Jurgen Moltmann:

...someone executed [by Crucifixion] was
rejected by his people,
cursed...by the God of the law,
and *excluded* from the covenant of life...¹⁰

Given that all societies of the day seemed to view Crucifixion as the worst form of execution, it makes sense that Jewish Christians – brought up on the words of the prophets – would begin to see a parallel between Christ’s Crucifixion and the poignant words of Isaiah, words that are familiar to us through Handel’s *Messiah*:

*He is despised and rejected of men;
A man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief...*¹¹

“This,” says Rutledge, “was the destiny chosen by the Creator and Lord of the universe [for the death of the Messiah]: *the death of a nobody*.”¹²

II.

Part of our reticence in fully describing the Crucifixion is the *degradation* and *shame* it involves. Again Isaiah:

*And we hid as it were our faces from him;
He was despised, and we esteemed him not.*¹³

⁷ This incident is found in David Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 14-15.

⁸ Rutledge 76. She points to the Roman comic dramatist Plautus as depicting in his plays slaves assuming this reality.

⁹ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011).

¹⁰ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 33; quoted in Rutledge 76.

¹¹ Isaiah 53:5 KJV.

¹² Rutledge 76.

¹³ Isaiah 53:5 KJV.

Rutledge says:

Crucifixion was specifically designed to be *the ultimate insult to personal dignity*, the last word in *humiliating* and *degrading* treatment. Degradation was the whole point.¹⁴

Isaiah:

*He had no form or majesty that we should look at him...
As one from whom others hide their faces...*¹⁵

Sontag concludes: “Only Christ, both Son of Man and Son of God, *suffers in his face*....”¹⁶

These various writers – Jewish, Christian, secular – all bear witness to this: Jesus of Nazareth, the historical person, the one whom we believe is Christ, the Messiah, God-with-us, both Son of Man and Son of God, suffered the most *intentionally degrading death* known to humankind.

III.

Because the method of Jesus’ death was so *degrading* at its core, we have to entertain the possibility that it was *godless* as well.

This is where I am most *cautious* of preaching this sermon, but most *determined* as well. Follow me along:

Of the seven last words Jesus is described as saying from the cross, only *one* is reported by not just *one*, but *two* Gospel writers. Both Matthew and Mark depict Jesus as uttering a “cry of dereliction”¹⁷:

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Two New Testament scholars under whom I have studied – Raymond Brown and Clifton Black – only go so far to say that on the cross Jesus “*perceived*” God was absent.¹⁸ But Rutledge, who also studied under Brown, proposes that God was *indeed absent*. She quotes the late Jaroslav Pelikan:

The glory of the Father was *withdrawn* from the solitary figure on the cross...now he is all *alone* and *forsaken*.¹⁹

Rutledge also interprets the fact that the disciples *abandon* Jesus after his arrest as not so much evidence of *fear* for their own lives as *terror* in the space left by the departed God.²⁰ “The eternal silence of these terrifying spaces terrifies me,” Pascal wrote.²¹

¹⁴ Rutledge 78.

¹⁵ Isaiah 53:3.

¹⁶ Sontag 40; quoted in Rutledge 81.

¹⁷ Rutledge 97.

¹⁸ Rutledge 98n63.

¹⁹ Rutledge 98n63.

²⁰ Rutledge 89.

²¹ Blaise Pascal, *Pensees III*, 206 (XIV, 201). Quoted in Rutledge 97n62.

IV.

In light of both the *degradation* of the cross and its potential *godlessness*, I want to share several thoughts with you that come simply from me.

First, I tend to think that if the Cross is as significant as, in this sermon series, we are making it out to be, it is logical that the Crucifixion of Christ would be *godless*, perhaps as the *only* or *one of few* moments *since Creation* from which God has *chosen* to be absent.²² But even this statement assumes that a *human measure* of time – such as “moment” – and a *human measure* of space – such as a place in which God could be “present” or from which God could be “absent” – can be applied to God. I am not so sure time and space mean the same thing to God they do to us.

But as Christian, I *also* believe that not even the Crucifixion of Christ could tear apart the Trinity, pitting Father against Son or Son against Father or Spirit against either.

- As Rutledge says: “The Son and Father are doing *this* in *concert*...By the power of the Spirit...[the Crucifixion] is a project of three persons.”²³

**

Thus, *second*: Perhaps the Crucifixion of Christ is *both* Godless *and* God-filled, *both* anguished absence and holy presence, two truths occupying the same *space* at the same *time*, as we know time and space.

- Perhaps it is the case that both *presence* and *absence* are “beneath the cross of Jesus [each fainting] to take [their] stand.”²⁴
- As Rutledge maintains: “In the God-*forsakenness* of Jesus, God was involved.”²⁵

**

And third, to end on a more positive note, according to our faith, Christ’s suffering, degradation, shame and even the potential of the absence of God from his shame, all relate to our *redemption*. In the sentences following each passage we read today, the writers move toward *hope* directly growing out of the death of Christ:

“By his bruises we are healed,” says Isaiah.²⁶

“Truly this man was God’s Son,” says the centurion at the foot of the cross.²⁷
And Paul’s concludes with a final stanza:

*Therefore God also highly exalted [Christ]
And gave him the name
That is above every name,*

²² I have trouble making an exclusive claim to God’s absence at the Crucifixion given the Holocaust.

²³ Rutledge 100.

²⁴ Elizabeth Cecilia Clephane, “Beneath the Cross of Jesus,” (1868), available at https://hymnary.org/text/beneath_the_cross_of_jesus_i_fain_would.

²⁵ She attributes this concept to both Karl Barth and Moltmann, see page 104n80.

²⁶ Isaiah 53:5.

²⁷ Mark 15:39.

*So that at the name of Jesus
Every knee should bend,
In heaven and on earth and under the earth,
And every tongue should confess
That Jesus Christ is Lord,
To the glory of God the Father.*²⁸

Each passage is seen to move toward the claim that the death of Christ plays an integral part in our *redemption*. “*Every knee should bend.*” “*Every knee.*”

It is to that *hope* we will turn our attention when we return to this series in a few weeks.

Amen.

© Larry R. Hayward, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria VA

²⁸ Philippians 2:9-11.