

**MOTIFS OF CRUCIFIXION:
RANSOM AND REDEMPTION**

Psalm 49:7-8

Jeremiah 31:10-11

Mark 10:45

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, February 6, 2022, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. This is part in a series entitled “Motifs of Crucifixion,” drawn heavily from a book written by Reverend Fleming Rutledge.¹

SCRIPTURES

Psalm 49:7-8

*Truly, no ransom avails for one’s life,
there is no price one can give to God for it.
For the ransom of life is costly,
and can never suffice...*

Jeremiah 31:10-11

*Hear the word of the LORD, O nations,
and declare it in the coastlands far away;
say, ‘He who scattered Israel will gather him,
and will keep him as a shepherd a flock.’
For the LORD has ransomed Jacob,
and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him.*

Mark 10:45

‘For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.’

It was in late high school or early college that I was first exposed to Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Its opening words captivated me:

*Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.*

...

*I cannot well repeat how there I entered,
So full was I of slumber at the moment
In which I had abandoned the true way.²*

In whatever youthful angst I was feeling at the time, these words – translated by Longfellow – stopped me in my tracks:

¹ Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015).

² Dante Alighieri, *Divine Comedy – Inferno* (1306), Canto 1, translated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Available at <https://wyomingcatholic.edu/wp-content/uploads/dante-01-inferno.pdf>.

*A forest dark.
A pathway lost.
A true way abandoned.
And I...
Cannot well repeat how there I entered.*

The words took me back to memories of my own “forests dark,” some but a few years old.

I went back:

To my first job when a flat-topped, tattooed man in his fifties – named, I kid you not, King Downs – charged toward me with a shovel in his hand when I had loaded a section of scaffolding into the bed of his pickup, doubtless too hard, doubtless too loud.

I went back

To the time an older teenager had turned her horse toward me and charged full speed ahead – as others laughed and mocked – because I was not getting out of her path in time for her.

These two incidents – these two memories – have to this day left me uncomfortable around worksites and fearful around horses.

*A forest dark.
A pathway lost.*

Memories of darkness I have seen in others came back as well.

In my early teens, our family would join other families for all-congregational workdays at the white clapboard Presbyterian Church we attended every Sunday: mowing the church lawn, cutting back brush for spring, weeding gardens so flowers could be planted.

One Saturday morning, I couldn’t help but notice amid the healthy happy families a slender man, about twenty, sun glistening off his white T-shirt and the blue of his blue jeans made even bluer.

In a church where everyone knew everyone’s name, I did not know who he was, and in the rare times he tried to talk, I noticed he couldn’t seem to make the words he wanted come out of his mouth. When I asked my parents about him, they whispered, “We’ll tell you when we get home.”

When they told me his name, I recognized it as belonging to one of the most prominent business families in Memphis.

“Gone off to college,” they said. “LSD. Now living with our minister and his family.”

*A forest dark.
A pathway lost.
A true way abandoned.*

A few years later, when I was in college, one of my roommates told me of a young father in the small Texas city in which he had graduated from high school, who had in his thirties a beautiful family and a big house and a burgeoning law practice and who one day had simply disappeared, later found to have been involved with organized crime in even that small Texas city.

By the time I read Dante I had seen enough to know he was onto something.

II.

In this eight-sermon series on Motifs of Crucifixion, the passages before us today are among the most touching and hopeful we have. Listen to the images they contain by which they point to God:

From the prophet Jeremiah:

*'He who scattered Israel will gather him,
and will keep him as a shepherd a flock.'
For the LORD has ransomed Jacob,
and has redeemed him
from hands too strong for him.*

Centuries later, in Mark's Gospel, Jesus speaks of himself as "Son of Man," the only Biblical title Jesus ever claims for himself.

*'For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve,
and to give his life a ransom for many.'*

**

In the New Testament:

- The general meaning of "redemption" is deliverance.
- The specific meaning applied to the cross is "deliverance at a *cost*," "deliverance with a *price*."
- The words "ransom" and "redemption" are linked to bear witness to Christ's deliverance of all of humanity and creation but a cost, the life he laid down as Son of Man. In the New Testament, these words – *ransom and redemption* – travel together like twins in the backseat of an SUV.

There are three separate Hebrew words the New Testament translates as “ransom” or “redemption.”

- One is *lutron*. Drawn from the worlds of law and commerce, *lutron* refers to a payment made in a legal exchange. Israel used the word to describe what God had done for them throughout their troubled history. Ransom. Redemption. *Lutron*.
- A second Old Testament word is *go'el*, which as a noun refers to a family member – next of kin or close relative – one who steps forward to assume responsibility for a family member who has grown vulnerable – particularly a widow or orphan. *Go'el* is what Boaz was to Ruth and Naomi; what centuries later Sonia was to Raskolnikov.³
- A third word is *kopher*, which means to *cover*, to *substitute for*, to *take the place of*, as in “I’ll cover your shift,” or “I’ll cover this debt for you.”

Lutron. Go'el. Kopher. A payment made. A redemption enacted. A debt covered by someone else.⁴

III.

Twelve years ago Maggie and I walked down from where we were living at the time to Hoffman Theatre to see a Coen Brothers re-make of the old John Wayne movie *True Grit*.⁵ At the end of the movie, Rooster Cogburn (played by Jeff Bridges), picks up thirteen-year-old Mattie Ross (played by Hailee Steinfeld), who is unconscious from a snakebite she incurred saving Rooster’s life. Rooster puts Mattie on his horse and they ride off silently to get her to a doctor.

As the movie ended and the credits rolled, I realized that Maggie was softly crying, something she never does in movies. Walking out, she said: “All those years, I just wanted God to pick me up and put me on his horse and take me home.” *Ransom* and *redemption*.

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We human beings can only think of God in *words* and *images*, though sometimes we seek to reduce God to concepts and formulas. The words we have for who God is what God has done – come as both verbs and nouns: deliverance, sacrifice, ransom, redemption. We craft them from the earthbound vocabulary some of us learned from flashcards as children and apply them to what we *know* and *experience* of God, to what we *hope* and *dream* of God. Yet God is greater than any images we have of God – male or female, human or divine, victorious warrior or gentle shepherd.

Each Motif of Crucifixion is an attempt to describe the indescribable, yet what they describe is *real*. Christ was indeed “crucified, dead and buried.” Indeed, he “rose again from the dead.”⁶

³ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment* (1866).

⁴ Rutledge 289-294.

⁵ *True Grit*, directed by Ethan Coen and Joel Coen, 2010.

⁶ *The Apostles Creed*.

- To say that on the cross Christ “ransoms” us is not to say that a power greater than Christ has kidnapped us and demanded that Christ leave a briefcase full of unmarked bills beside a park bench.
- To say that Christ “redeems” us from the powers of Sin and Evil is not to say that that Sin and Evil have won the war and Christ has to pay a ransom to get us released from our POW camp.

The images of *ransom* and *redemption* simply show, as our reading from the Psalms indicates, that the powers of Sin and Evil are so great that “no ransom” *we ourselves pay* could “avail” our life.

- Like paying only the minimum on a credit card each month, *our own payment* “can never suffice.”
- Like the boys trapped in the cave in Thailand a few years ago, we can only be rescued by someone from the outside, someone who joins us in the “forest dark” into which we have wandered, someone who risks their life that we might be set free.

For the Son of Man came...to give his life a ransom for many.

IV.

In the forest dark, Dante reaches “a mountain’s foot.” He looks upward and sees the sun: “*that planet’s rays//which leadeth others right by every road.*”

The sun’s rays lead him to the poet Virgil, then to Beatrice, who becomes his muse, and finally to St. Bernard of Clairvaux. Virgil leads Dante to through the Inferno and where he sees human sin and the damage it does:

- *Lust* – not the beauty of passion, not the tenderness of attraction, not the intimacy of union and reunion, but the corruption of that beauty, the violence and force and betrayal with which it often comes, the pain it brings to all it touches.
- *Gluttony* – our obsession with too much food, too little food, food not prepared to our standards, food disrespected through the absence of standards, food wasted, food squandered, food used as a political weapon, the simple failure of the systems of the world to devise ways to distribute the earth’s plentiful bounty of food.
- *Greed* – “It takes away the life of its possessors,”⁷ says Proverbs. It “makes trouble for their households.”⁸ It “stirs up strife.”⁹ We can fill in the blanks with our own examples.

⁷ Proverbs 1:19.

⁸ Proverbs 15:27.

⁹ Proverbs 28:25.

- *Wrath* – not the righteous wrath at injustice and wrong, but wrath turned toward those we simply don't want around, anger aimed at those who stand in the way of our smallish and selfish desires; anger aimed at those who know us better than we know our selves and call us to the self they know lies within us.
- *Heresy* – the mind and heart that will not even entertain the possibility that beyond mind and matter, beyond flesh and blood, beyond chemicals in the body and neurological functions, lies a power that transcends all these.
- *Violence* –

*Where have all the young men gone?
Gone to soldiers, everyone.
Oh, when will they ever learn?
Oh, when will they ever learn?*¹⁰

- *And finally Fraud and Treachery* –

*...lies of tongue and pen...
...all the easy speeches
that comfort cruel men...*¹¹

Like Dante, we can only be redeemed by the One who redeems us from outside, and who leads us through and beyond Sin and Evil as we follow the poet, the muse, and the saint.

From my childhood years, I have always been aware of the apocalyptic threats about which the world has worried.

- The Red Scare of my childhood, leading people to build backyard bomb shelters
- The assassinations and urban violence of the Sixties
- The changes that came with Woodstock
- The population explosion
- The threat of nuclear war
- The threat climate crisis
- The AIDS epidemic
- Terrorism
- COVID
- The threats to democracy and home and abroad.

¹⁰ Pete Seeger, "Where Have All the Flowers Gone," 1955, available by various artists on YouTube. See for example <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bI3QVsW30j0>.

¹¹ "O God of Earth and Altar," Gilbert K. Chesterton, 1906.

Alongside these I've also lived through my own pains and losses, sins and sadness. I hope to be proven right, but I have always been able to say: "This will not last forever. God will get us through this."

*I know that my Redeemer lives [said Job],
and that at the last he will stand upon the earth...
whom my eyes shall behold, and no other.¹²*

Dante closes the Divine Comedy:

*...already my desire and my will
were being turned like a wheel, all at one speed,
by the Love which moves the sun and the other stars.¹³*

That love for Dante was and for us is Jesus Christ, who gave his life as a ransom for many, you and I included.

Amen.

¹² Job 19:25, 27 (alt.).

¹³ Dante Alighieri, *Divine Comedy – Paradise* (1306), Canto 33, translated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Available at <https://www.perlego.com/book/1713173/divine-comedy-longfellows-translation-paradise-pdf>.