

Hebrews 9:11-15

The Crucifixion

Lent 5

Those of us who have been walking the Way of Sorrows in this Lenten season have seen much of agony and anguish and blood. In the Passion History readings on Wednesday evenings (before we had to halt them due to the Coronavirus) we have looked back on some of the darkest hours in the history of the world. And when we walk the road that winds from the Upper Room out through the city gate across the Brook Kidron up the gentle slopes of the Mount of Olives and back again to Jerusalem, to the courtrooms of priest and procurator and potentate, and then moves out again toward the green hill beyond the city wall, we come inevitably to the blackest hour of all, to the darkest moment in all the history of man. For there at last we behold, on the rude summit of Golgotha, transfixed on a Roman cross, the expiring Messiah, the dying Christ.

Just a few months ago we heard again, on Christmas Eve, the joyful news of a Savior who was born in Bethlehem, and we stood with great joy at the scene of His humble birth. Today we stand in deepest sorrow beneath the cross of His revolting death. The lowly manger, in all its simple beauty, gives way to the uplifted cross in all its grim horror.

It is a ghastly scene, for the blood of the Son of God, on that darkest of Fridays, oozed, trickled, and poured from the brow and the back and the hands and the feet and the side of the dying Jesus of Nazareth. It is a scene of such vivid frightfulness and of such profound horror that no painter has ever succeeded in picturing it as it really was. It is a scene from which many prefer to draw away. There are those who would like to have the whole picture withdrawn from the mind and memory of man. The story of the death of Christ, they infer, is far too horrible to be retold.

It would be better, they tell us, to remember and proclaim, instead of the Christ of Golgotha, the gentle and scholarly Christ of the Sermon on the Mount. The “blood theology” of the Bible, as they sometimes refer to it, is revolting to them. They don’t want to sing hymns that speak of “a fountain filled with blood.” They turn their backs and shut their eyes and stop up their ears and close their minds to the dying Christ and the blood that moistened the soil of Calvary.

Why did it happen in the first place? Why this lurid spectacle of the uplifted cross? Why was it necessary for this gory chapter to be written into the history of man? Why did this gentle Jesus have to shed His precious blood and lay down His holy life?

Maybe you know the answer. Maybe you’ve known it for years. Maybe you’ve always known it. Maybe you don’t know it at all. And perhaps that’s why you’ve been inclined to agree sometimes with those who say that our Lutheran Church is inclined to place far too much emphasis on the dying Christ, that we make too much of the Gospel of Lent and speak too freely and too often of the given life and shed blood of the Crucified.

What does the Scripture say? What is the verdict of the divine Word? What happened on Calvary? How important is it? What does it mean? What does it mean to you and me?

The Bible answers in a multitude of passages and summons a whole cloud of witnesses. Listen to a prophet who died hundreds of years before Jesus was born: **Surely**

He (the Messiah) has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows...He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities...The Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all...He was stricken for the transgression of My people...He bore the sin of many.

Listen to the fiery forerunner, John the Baptizer: **Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!**

Listen to the Son of God Himself: **The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.**

Listen to John, the beloved evangelist who leaned on the Master's breast: **The blood of Jesus, His Son, cleanses us from all sin. ...He is the expiation for our sins and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.**

Listen to the impetuous fisherman, Simon, who was called Peter the Rock: **He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed.**

Listen to the great apostle to the Gentiles, the onetime enemy of the church who became its most penetrating missionary and its most powerful promoter: **I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified...There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all.... God shows His love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. Since therefore we are now justified by His blood, much more shall we be saved by Him from the wrath of God. ...In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace.**

So it goes on and on, the clear and unmistakable testimony of those who knew Him, who were called by Him to preach His Word and to build His church, who were moved by the Spirit of God to write the sacred Scriptures. They all agree that Christ died as the sinner's Substitute, that His blood was shed and that His life was lived and laid down to atone for the transgressions of all the world. All of the bloody sacrifices of the Old Testament church pointed to that one climactic fact. In all the years before Golgotha, and ever since, they who have longed for the pardon of an offended God, they who have hoped to be saved from the guilt and the punishment of sin, they who have sought to be restored once more into the fellowship of a loving Father, have focused their attention on Calvary and the atonement that was purchased there with the blood of the Son of God.

No wonder that a noted evangelist of another century, raised to the heights of eloquence, cried, "I glory in this religion of blood. I am thrilled to see it in the sacramental cup. I am thrilled as I see the altars of ancient sacrifice crimson with the blood of the bullock and the lamb...Now I see why the destroying angel passing over Egypt in the night spared all those houses that had their doorposts sprinkled with blood. Now I know whom the Book of Revelation means when it describes a heavenly chieftain whose vesture was dipped in blood, what Peter means when he speaks of 'the precious blood that cleanses from all sin,' and what Paul means when he cries, 'Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.' By that blood you and I will be saved, or never saved at all. Glory be to God that the hill back of Jerusalem was the battlefield on which Christ achieved our liberty!" (Talmage, *Tabernacle Sermons*, 1886.)

It was the miracle of divine grace revealed on Calvary, the blood-bought atonement proclaimed in the divine Word, that converted Martin Luther and taught him to write, in his immortal explanation of the Second Article of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, Son of the Father from eternity, and true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord. He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, saved me at great cost from sin, death, and the power of the devil—not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood and His innocent suffering and death. All this He has done that I may be His own, and live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true."

How long has it been since you repeated and pondered those once familiar words? After listening to that marvelous confession of faith from the lips of a humble Christian, a proud and yet troubled agnostic once said, "If I could believe that, I would be the happiest man in the world."

And a far better man, too, in many ways. For once we have found out what really happened on Calvary and have been led by the Spirit of God into a personal, believing relationship with Him who died on that once remote and meaningless cross and have learned to count on the fact that He died there in our stead beneath the burden of our guilt, we're going to be different than we were before.

Sin, for example, which the world is likely to consider with some amusement and often finds attractive, will be seen by us in quite another light. For we shall remember that it was sin that crucified the Son of God, the sin we share with the whole human race. We're going to find it much more difficult to find excuses for our own behavior. We shall find it ever so much easier and totally necessary, in our daily approaches to God in prayer, and in our weekly worship of God in company with fellow believers, to say in all sincerity: "We have sinned against Thee by thought, word, and deed; wherefore we flee for refuge to Thine infinite mercy, seeking and imploring Thy grace." We will come with thankful hearts to the Table of the Lord to receive the blessed Sacrament that speaks and offers forgiveness in the given body and the shed blood. We will remember gratefully what St. Paul says so clearly in the 6th chapter of Romans, that **all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death**. In other words, Christians are partakers of everything that happened on Calvary. It is just as if we had died. The apostle continues: **We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.... Our old self was crucified with Him so that the sinful body might be destroyed and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.**

Doesn't that mean being different people and living a new kind of life? St. Paul answers that too. **If we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him...The life He lives He lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.**

Alive to God in Christ Jesus! One commentator suggests here a most meaningful paraphrase: "Look upon yourselves as dead to the appeal and power of sin but alive and sensitive to the call of God in Christ Jesus!"

"Alive and sensitive to the call of God in Christ Jesus!" What a different world it would be if this were characteristic of the human race! And what a vastly different church! And what different people we would be! If only the Christians of the world

would look upon themselves as dead to the appeal and power of sin and alive and sensitive to the call of God in Christ, they would truly be living stones of a living spiritual temple, and the church of Christ in the world of men would be a living, active, cleansing, and saving force. Then surely we would **seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness**. Much of the energy we dissipate and the means we squander, so many of the concerns which we direct upon ourselves, would turn toward others with infinite blessing for them and for us.

It is good for us therefore to stand again beneath the cross. We need to be reminded of this death. We need to know again and again its meaning for us and for all mankind. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria