

**WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?
A PAINFUL LIFE
ISAIAH 52:13-53:12
MARCH 29, 2013
GOOD FRIDAY**

In August of 2003, the Church of the Holy Cross in New York City was broken into twice.

In the first break-in, thieves stole a metal moneybox that had been resting next to a votive candle rack. Three weeks later, vandals escaped with something much more valuable.

They unbolted a 4-foot long, 200-pound plaster crucifix from a meditation area,
taking the statue of Christ,
but leaving behind his wooden cross on the wall.

The church caretaker, David St. James, confessed his bewilderment at this:

"They just decided, 'We're going to leave the cross and take Jesus.'
We don't know why they took just him.
We figure if you want the crucifix, you take the whole crucifix."

I understand why they wanted Jesus but not the cross.

I love baby Jesus at Christmas.

I like Jesus' story telling.

I like him healing the sick.

I even like him challenging religious folks who arrogantly assume they've got God in their pocket.

But the suffering and death of the cross?

Not so much.

It's why Good Friday services are attended by a tiny fraction of those who will be here on Easter morning.

Good Friday is one of those very uncomfortable days.

Do I want to go to that service, or not?

It's sort of a downer, you know.

Oh, they call it "Good" Friday.

But it's all about Jesus' death.

Now, if it was Christmas or Easter?

Celebration! Happy songs, pretty decorations, big crowds, all upbeat.

But Good Friday?

I don't know.

What's on TV tonight?

I'm glad you decided to come.

It's good to know Jesus' first followers were a bit off kilter about this whole crucifixion thing, too.

Jesus was not at all the messiah they expected.

There were many different ideas about what the messiah would be like and exactly what he would do.

Some Jews waited for a new Moses-type figure

to bring the people into perfect obedience to the Law.

Some hoped for a miracle working prophet of God to come set things right.

Some watched for a conquering king like King David so long ago.

Some believed the messiah would start a violent revolution

and overturn the Roman oppressors.

Some thought they ought to start the revolution themselves,

and then messiah would come to lead them to victory.

But no one, absolutely no one, expected a messiah who would suffer and die.

In fact, the very idea was distasteful to a good Jew.

They knew that Deuteronomy 21:23 says, “Anyone hung on a tree is under God’s curse.” (Dt.21:23)

The Messiah, God’s anointed, cannot be cursed.

He must be blessed, greatly blessed.

But Paul, a well-trained Pharisee,

steeped in knowledge of the Scriptures,

found in that very verse the key to understanding Jesus and his death on the cross.

He wrote in Galatians 3:13 that,

“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.” (Ga.3:13)

He became the curse for us.

He bore the punishment for sin,

for the sins of the world, for your sins and mine.

And if we accept that as his gift to us,

we can stand before God forgiven, redeemed, as if we had no sin.

The early Christians found Jesus’ suffering and death reflected in the prophecies of Isaiah, written hundreds of years before Jesus.

There are several “songs” in Isaiah known today as the Servant Songs.

Isaiah 52-53 gives us a song of a Suffering Servant of God.

ISAIAH 52:13-53:12

Marred appearance, despised, rejected, suffering, infirmity, oppressed, slaughter.

Words no one would have associated with God’s messiah.

He has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases.

Wounded for our transgressions.

Crushed for our iniquities.

Make his life an offering for sins.

To our ears it all points toward Jesus and the cross,

suffering and dying for our sins,

taking the punishment we were due, so we could be forgiven.

It’s the theological doctrine of the vicarious atonement.

Vicarious, in that he took our place and suffered for us.

Atonement, meaning he made us “at-one” with God.

But to his first followers, this passage had nothing to do with God’s messiah.

No one had ever read it that way.

Not until after Jesus’ death and resurrection.

During his earthly ministry they were expecting the blessings of the kingdom to take shape any moment.

And they were maneuvering to make sure they got a share of the goodies.

They argued among themselves about which of them was

the greatest follower of Jesus.

(Mk.9:34)

Jesus said, “Whoever wants to be first must be

last of all and servant of all.”

(Mk.9:35)

One chapter later,

James and John asked him for seats at his right and left hand in his kingdom,

places of honor, prestige, and power.

Can you imagine?

The others were indignant with them.

Because they got their first.

(Mk.10:37, 41)

Jesus spoke up again,

“Among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers

lord it over them.

But it is not so among you.

Whoever wishes to become great among you
 must become your servant,
 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.
 For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve,
 and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mk.10:42-44)

In fact, Mark’s Gospel tells us that they never did really get it.

Not so long as Jesus was alive.

In Mark’s Gospel the only time someone really, truly sees who he is
 is at the cross.

And then it’s a Roman soldier who saw him die.

“Truly this man was the Son of God.” (Mk.15:39)

This question of who the messiah is and what he accomplishes

is not just a matter of theological understanding.

It has very practical implications.

Because Jesus’ followers did not understand that Jesus fulfilled God’s plan for a suffering messiah,
 they also did not understand what it meant to follow such a messiah.

That may be why some people don’t show up for Good Friday.

Perhaps they sense the connection.

They may have an innate sense that,
 if they get too close to the blood of Christ,
 it will become all too clear that following him might require their blood.

Our blood.

If we follow a messiah who enters into pain,
 following him might mean a painful life for us.

If we serve a king who sheds his own blood for the sake of others,
 serving him might require us to shed blood.

If we give our lives to the one who gave his life as a ransom for many,
 we might have to surrender our own lives.

If he was willing to suffer and die....

What about me?

The apostle Paul wrote,

“I have been crucified with Christ;
 and it is no longer I who live,
 but it is Christ who lives in me.” (Ga.2:20a)

Follow Jesus means dying to self.

Dying to self.

No more I, me, or my.

I want, I need, I think, I feel all become irrelevant.

My tastes, my desires, my wants, my needs are no longer the issue.

It’s not about me.

It’s not about you.

It is now all about Jesus.

And not just at church, but in every aspect of my life.

I heard of a sermon that was entitled,

"Marriage: A Sneaky Way to Get a Person Crucified."

At first the title seemed crazy to me.

What in the world does marriage have to do with crucifixion?

Then I thought about it, and I realized the answer:

A lot.

It is sneaky.

You don't sign up for marriage because you're thrilled about the prospect of
learning to deny yourself or losing your old way of life.

You don't go into it thinking,

“Oh, good, this is going to be really hard.

Thank goodness I'll finally get to have
my character defects nailed
and my selfishness flogged.”

Nobody goes into marriage because they are eager to take up a cross.

But if a marriage is going to work,
there will be a lot of denying yourself,
taking up your cross,
and following in the way of Jesus.

That is, after all, how Jesus defined great love.

“Greater love has no one than this,
that you lay down your life for your friends.” (Jn.15:13)
That you lay down your life for your husband, your wife.

And not just in marriage.

That you lay down your life for your kids.

That you lay down your life for your aging parents.

Greater love has no one than this,

that you sacrifice some creature comforts
so you can give financial support to a worthwhile ministry
or help out your neighbor whose been out of work for a while.

Greater love has no one than this,

that you quit trying to make the church the way you like it,
and instead try to make it more attractive and open to
people who do not yet belong and perhaps do not know Jesus.

Try to make it more accessible to children, to young adults,
to people who are a different age, color, or income bracket.

Greater love has no one than this,

that I die to self,
that I quit concentrating on what I like,
what I am used to,
what I am comfortable with,
that I sacrifice self-interest

when it gets in the way of serving the well-being of someone else.

A family was taking a nice Sunday afternoon drive,

when suddenly the children began shouting,

"Stop the car! There's a kitten by the road!"

The father kept on driving,

but his children wouldn't quiet down.

He tried to reason with them.

The kitten was probably someone's pet.

It might have a disease.

The family already had too many pets.

It did no good.

The children insisted that a loving father would stop the car for a stray cat.

So finally the father drove back to the spot and reached for the scraggly kitten.

The ungrateful little beast scratched him!
 Fighting an instinct to strangle the kitten,
 the father packed it into the car and took it home.
 Once at home, the children created a bed for the kitten out of their softest blankets.
 They fed the kitten droppers full of milk.
 They petted and fussed over the kitten.
 Soon, the kitten was purring and rubbing on family members,
 especially the father,
 as if he were its best friend.
 The father looked at the scars on his hand left by the kitten.
 Then he looked at the comfortable, well-fed kitten rubbing against his leg.
 Had he suddenly become more worthy of love?
 No.
 His intentions toward the cat had always been to do it good, not harm.
 Something had happened to the kitten that made it feel secure, loved, accepted.
 And that's exactly what happened to you and to me.
 Something happened to us that made us feel secure, loved and accepted by Jesus.
 But it left scars on his hands.
 It involved a cross.
 It involved suffering and death.
 So we're here tonight.
 Maybe a bit reluctant about it.
 Perhaps a little ambivalent.
 But we're here.

Avoiding the pain of our own cross is not a new syndrome for followers of Christ.
 When writing in the fifth century A.D., Augustine, Bishop of Hippo wrote:
 "It is necessary to die,
 but nobody wants to.
 We want to reach the kingdom of God,
 but we don't want to travel by way of death.
 And yet there stands Necessity saying:
 "This way, please."

You have a card with a nail on it.
 The scripture verse on the card is from Paul's instructions about how to prepare yourself for communion.
 "Examine your motives, test your heart." (1Cor.11:28 MSG)
 We're not celebrating communion tonight.
 That was last night.
 But tonight is an appropriate time for us to again examine our motives and test our hearts.
 It is an appropriate time for us to confess our sins,
 especially acknowledging how we have often failed to
 deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus.
 During our time of confession,
 you are invited to write on that card a sin or a sin pattern that is in your life.
 It can be very specific,
 or you can write something vague,
 so long as it means something to you.
 When you have written something down,
 bring it to the cross and nail it there.

If you want to kneel at the rail to pray, you can.

After all have nailed their sins to the cross:

These are our sins.

These are the sins that Jesus took onto himself.

In doing so, he was separated from his heavenly Father for the first time since eternity past.

So he cried out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

It may have been his deepest suffering that day.

These are sins that made the cross necessary.

These are the sins for which he bore the punishment.

These are the sins he paid for,

so we could be forgiven and stand before God as if we were without sin.

These are the sins that left scars on his hands.

Even resurrected, Jesus bore the scars.

He still does.

These are your sins and mine.

Prayer:

Scriptures cited: Dt.21:23; Ga.3:13; Is.52:13-53:12; Mk.9:34-35; 10:37, 41-44; 15:39; Ga.2:20a; Jn.15:13