

Why Did Jesus Have to Die?

When it comes to the actual crucifixion of Jesus, it seems that the majority of sermons I've heard on the story over the years have primarily focused on details of the event itself. What was crucifixion? How was it accomplished? Who said what and to whom? What was the crime of the other two men executed that day and how is it that they were different? What is the significance of the division of Jesus' clothes? What did he mean by "Today you will be with me in Paradise?" Was there an eclipse? What happened at the Temple? What's the meaning of Jesus' last words? Where were his friends? I imagine you all have heard those sermons too and there are plenty of books and movies that amply investigate the physical facts of the death of Jesus. But what has been haunting me for far longer than the past weeks that I've been planning this series of sermons is a different kind of a question; not how or what or who or when but why? Why did Jesus have to die, or, perhaps more strongly, did Jesus have to die?

It's a question that can find answers on a number of different levels, some of which I want to explore this morning. It's an important question, not in that the possible answers give us an immediate bit of wisdom on which to base daily life choices but because they give us insight into the very basic life choice of whether or not it makes sense to base one's life on the teachings and actions of an obscure teacher from an impoverished and occupied country on the other side of the world from two thousand years ago. The earliest writings we have from the followers of Jesus indicate that his death and subsequent resurrection were of central importance to them as they struggled to put together their understanding of how God's world worked, understandings which we now follow. I think it must have been so from the very moment Jesus was led away from the olive grove that fateful night. Why Jesus? Why must this good man, this best man die? Why did he die?

To the best ability of scholars to discern such things, the oldest extant writings we have from the followers of Jesus are the letters written to churches by Paul of Tarsus and the oldest of those is likely his first letter to the church at Thessalonica. If you read the whole letter as we have it – and, really folks, it takes a whole two pages in our pew Bibles, so it's not an onerous task – a couple of verses may jump out at you. Toward the beginning of the letter, in chapter one, verse ten, Paul writes, "(you) wait for (God's) Son from heaven, whom God raised from the dead— Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming." Toward the end, Paul repeats this idea in chapter 5, verses 9 & 10: "For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us..." From the very beginning, the disciples of Jesus imposed a sense of meaning on his brutal death: He died for us.

Interestingly, this is not all that different from the meaning that Jesus' enemies assigned to Jesus' death. You may remember some of the ideas I raised in my first sermon back from Sabbatical in September, which I called "The Ends and the Means." For Caiaphas and the chief priests, as we read in the Gospel According to John, the death of Jesus was simply a convenient means to an important end – the safety of the nation – and the end justified the means. Or, as Caiaphas said, "it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." The Gospel's author comments, "He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God." But for Caiaphas, none of that was meant. He simply saw a rabble-rouser who needed to be dispensed with for the sake of peace with the Romans.

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Of course, Jesus' real vulnerability came from his willingness to stand in opposition to the powers that be, both within his own nation and among the Romans. Caiaphas and the others feared that Jesus would threaten their comfortable power not only because he rallied the people but because he criticized *them*, Sadducees, Pharisees, and all in power. They wanted him shut up before the people turned against them. Likewise, Pilate, either through his own instincts and penchant for cruelty or because he was suborned by the Jewish authorities, wanted Jesus dead because he was a political threat. At the most basic of levels, Jesus had to die because he was in the way of the powers that be, both religious and political.

At a similarly basic level, Jesus had to die because he would not back down. It is possible to preach personal righteousness and love without confrontation. Lots of preachers of all faiths do it all the time. But Jesus' understanding of righteousness included justice and equity and it's really hard to preach those things without getting in the face of those who are taking advantage of, promoting, or enabling an unjust, inequitable system. Jesus constantly put himself at risk by speaking out against those same powers, the scribes and the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Herodians, the Romans, the rich, Herod himself. Jesus was warned to watch his back, even by some whom he criticized. He knew that by taking his fight to Jerusalem that he was taking on representatives of power that he could not humanly defeat. He knew they would kill him. Nevertheless, he persisted. Jesus had to die because he would not be still, or at least he saved his silence for when even that was provocative. Jesus had to die because he dared the system to kill him.

But even with the might of Temple and State ranged against him, even with his non-stop provocation of the allies of the status quo, his death seemed to his followers and still seems to us today to be almost inconceivable unless it somehow served and serves a greater purpose. He died "for us." So Paul says, so the Gospel writers and other epistle writers say, so have said a hundred generations of theologians. And, perhaps, that should be enough – the mystery that in ways we cannot quite get our minds around this best possible man died so that we could live, live truly, live differently, live the life that God meant for humankind to live all along. For some, that basic statement, "Jesus died for us," is enough. It's not in the Chalice Hymnal but I grew up singing the old hymn, "My Faith Has Found a Resting Place." Do you know it? The repeated chorus says, "I need no other argument, / I need no other plea; / It is enough that Jesus died, / And that He died for me."

But, of course, we are so rarely content with mystery and so the theories have come along and I must, perforce, give you all some way to understand their basics and deal with them because people will ask you and expect you to have some sort of answer. The most popular theory among American Protestants continues to be the idea that of Substitution, that Jesus literally died in our place. In simple terms, this theory says that humankind is so sin-ridden and foul that God cannot forgive us, we must be punished. But Jesus steps between us and our rightful punishment and takes our sins upon himself, dying that dreadful death upon the cross so that God's justice is satisfied vicariously and we are free to approach God because the sacrifice of Jesus has saved us. Although this is the theology that I and I suspect many here grew up with, I have become more and more troubled by it. For one thing it limits the freedom of God to love and forgive, attaching God's love and forgiveness necessarily to punishment. Also, it seems to set up God not as the Loving Father whom Jesus taught but more as a divine child abuser, raging at an innocent and

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dealing out destruction to His child in His wrath. For another thing, this theory of atonement has been used too often to encourage passive acceptance of abuse and injustice in women and minorities.

But there is no doubt that the theory of Substitutionary Atonement does work for some people. Baptist scholar S. Mark Heim, who has done deeply meaningful work on ideas of why Jesus had to die, points out that, surprisingly, this difficult idea has great appeal for those at the bottom of the world's regard. He writes: "...the theology of the cross has a peculiar history among the poor and the marginalized. The testimony of numberless such persons indicates that they do not see in the cross a mandate for passive suffering of evil. What they see, in the midst of a world that regards them as nobodies, is the most powerful affirmation of their individual worth. That Christ, that God, was willing to suffer and die specifically for them is a message of hope and self-respect that can hardly be measured, and that transforms their lives. That God has become one of the broken and despised ones of history is an unshakable reference point from which to resist the mental colonization that accepts God as belonging to the side of the oppressors." If the old Substitutionary theory of why Jesus had to die is bringing comfort to the ones Jesus called "the least of these," then it ill behooves me as a child of power and privilege to cast aspersions on their hope.

Another still-living theologian who has done a good deal to rehabilitate the Substitutionary theory is Jürgen Moltmann. The very title of Moltmann's best-known book, The Crucified God, tells the story. God may be the one who requires the death of Jesus, Moltmann points out, but if we take seriously our Trinitarian belief that Jesus *is* God, then God is also the one who suffers that death. As Mark Heim summarizes, "Whatever the reason for the offering, it is made by God and what is offered is God's own self... The sacrifice is not directed to God: it takes place within God. There is no difference in will between the Father and the Son; both act out of passion for human redemption. And there is no difference in suffering. Both suffer... The incarnate Word suffers what it is to die. The Father suffers what it is like to lose the beloved to death. Everything that makes death more bitter to the one who dies—brutality, injustice, arbitrariness—heightens the terror and suffering of that death to the ones who remain. There is no impassive God who observes and accepts Jesus's death. There is only the God who knows both the agony of losing one's self at the cross and the agony of losing the beloved there. Let those who have seen the pain of two loving spouses, one dying and one living, judge which half of the broken heart is lighter." In this view, our question is changed from "Why did Jesus have to die?" to "Did God Godself suffer for us?"

There are, of course, other answers to the question "Why did Jesus have to die?" One idea is that Jesus died as an example to us. We can see Jesus as a hero, demonstrating that a human being can be faithful to what is right despite suffering and pain and even death. Here, too, the Trinitarian understanding is important because in Jesus, the Son, the Father shows God's no-limit love for humankind. If even God will so sacrifice God's being to stand for justice, should we not follow suit? It is an inspirational ideal of Jesus' death and has had an appeal to many for centuries. Why did Jesus have to die? To show us the way to live.

Yet another long-standing theory that has been given new emphasis in recent days is known as the "Christus Victor" theory, Jesus as champion. Maybe if this idea gains in popularity, we can

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start singing Queen's famous hit as a hymn: "We are the champions, my friend..." OK, I'm being a little silly but it's a natural way to remember the idea: in the end, God through Jesus has won the war against death and the powers of evil. This idea refuses to separate Jesus' death on Friday from his resurrection on Sunday. Jesus died so that God could raise him up, showing that against the power of God all other powers are swept away. Not only is God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, victorious but so is the Church, the Body of Christ, and all of us individually as members of Christ. Or, as Freddy Mercury might put it, "We are the champions of the world." Queen references aside, this is essentially the view of another living theologian, the Mennonite scholar, J. Denny Weaver, whose book The Nonviolent Atonement I heartily recommend. In the life of Jesus, Weaver points out that we see the working out of the in-breaking reign of God, validated by Jesus' resurrection which marks the defeat of the powers of evil. It is in this victory that we are saved, not in Jesus' death, which was a result of the action of those powers, not of the will of God. But Jesus' victory over death means that death is ultimately defeated; we need not fear its power. Today, we celebrate the armistice that ended World War I. It turns out that the "War to end all wars" did not, in fact accomplish that goal. But Jesus' death is the death to end all deaths, spiritually speaking.

These are just some of the possible answers to the question, "Why did Jesus have to die?" Certainly he died because the powers of Jerusalem in A.D. 33 were arrayed against him. He died, too, because he accepted death as the ultimate price for the good he was trying to do for God's people. He died, in a mysterious way we are still debating, for us, as a way for God to reach into human affairs and change things. You may resonate with some or all or none of the ideas I've presented this morning. If you have a favorite, remember that others have found meaning in other theories, too. Part of the lesson here is to respect the spiritual path of other Christians. We are too different as people for "one size fits all" answers. But I encourage you to consider your own response. Why do you think Jesus died? Why do you come to this place at this time every week to hear about the life and work and teachings of a man who was condemned and executed as a criminal? Why do you, a Gentile whose ancient ancestors would have given homage to Odin or Cernunnos or Murungu or to even more ancient ancestors, why do you worship the God of Abraham and Sarah? Is it true that you boast only in the death of Christ, your God? The answers you arrive at are important; not only for the sake of your own understanding but for the sake of those who will ask you why you are a follower of Jesus: your neighbors, your co-workers, your children, your grandchildren.

Why did Jesus die? He died for us, for me, for you, for those who have fallen asleep, for those who are yet to be born. Why did Jesus die? He died for love. Thanks be to God! Amen.