

"The Road to Hell"

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First Presbyterian Church of Corpus Christi, Texas
Isaiah 53:1-12 • John 18:28-19:16a • February 26, 2012

This morning, after a two-week break, we are now returning to our study of the Apostles' Creed. The last time we were together we began to look at who Jesus is and what we mean when we say we believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.

Today we want to try to understand why it's important for us to say we believe that Jesus "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried," and that "he descended into hell."

As some of you are aware, this is the first Sunday in what is known as Lent in the liturgical church calendar. From now until Easter, many Christians will intentionally focus their attention on Jesus' suffering and death as a way to prepare to celebrate the resurrection on Easter Sunday. In some traditions, this involves fasting or denying themselves some thing that they normally enjoy. You've all heard of people giving up something for Lent.

But historically, Presbyterians don't generally observe Lent the way that, say, the Roman Catholic or Episcopal churches do. The reason for that is that in our tradition, every Sunday is Easter Sunday. Every time we come together to worship we should be celebrating the Resurrection with the same passion as we do on Easter. That also means that every other day of the week we should be preparing for Sunday. In other words, every day is Lent, all year long.

However, sometimes it's good to have the calendar remind us to concentrate on what's important, so while we don't strictly observe Lent, we do use this time to help us recognize what Jesus has done for us. Instead of giving up something, many of us use this time to add one of the spiritual disciplines to our daily life, things like daily Bible reading, or prayer. We have a number of new Bible Study small groups that are studying the Promises of God. If you haven't joined one of these groups, please consider it. There are groups that meet in the evening and at noon, some in people's homes around the city and in Portland, some here at the church.

So as we enter this season of reflecting on the sacrifice Jesus made, it's appropriate for us to begin with the section of the Creed dealing with Jesus' crucifixion and death. The first thing we might ask ourselves is whether it's really that important to our faith to confess that Jesus suffered, was crucified, died and was buried. Let me say that it's not only important, it is *central* to our faith as Christians. As pastor Robert Mills wrote, "to deny that Jesus Christ...was crucified, dead and buried is to deny the facts that lie at the foundation of our Christian faith and life."

The first phrase in this part of the creed says that Jesus, "suffered under Pontius Pilate." It's interesting that the only human being mentioned in the Creed, other than Jesus, is this insignificant, ineffective Roman government official. Yet in a statement of

faith as concise as the Apostles' Creed, which tries to state the faith in as few words as possible, every line is extremely important. There's no fluff in the Creed. So the mention of Pontius Pilate is important to our faith.

As we talked about last time, we believe that the same God who created the earth and everything in it came here as a real human being at a particular time and place in and as Jesus Christ. The mention of Pilate identifies when and where these things took place. We know about Pontius Pilate from several secular historical documents so we know when he was governor in Judea, so we can have a pretty good idea when Jesus was crucified. In fact, Jesus' crucifixion is mentioned in some of these ancient documents. So we know that he really lived and we know that he really was crucified by the Romans and that he died.

When we study what it means to say that Jesus "suffered under Pontius Pilate," we discover that there's a lot to it. First, all four Gospels tell us of the way Jesus was beaten almost to death by the Roman soldiers and had a crown of thorns pushed down on his head. He certainly suffered. But we also learn from the Bible and from the ancient historians that Pilate was a cruel governor, using his soldiers to subdue the people of Judea. In Luke 13 we read how Pilate mingled some Galileans blood with their sacrifices, which was highly offensive to the Jews.

Which makes it ironic that the Jewish leaders came to Pilate and said, "if you don't execute Jesus, you are not Caesar's friend. He claims to be a king and our only king is Caesar." But this is important. You see, Pilate was politically a very weak governor. Actually, he was

like an assistant governor under the supervision of the governor of Syria. Pilate had already been in trouble with Tiberius Caesar several times because of riots in Jerusalem. So the Jewish leaders were basically threatening to report Pilate to the emperor, something he couldn't afford if he was going to keep his comfortable lifestyle.

This explains why the Bible reports that Pilate wanted to release Jesus. He knew full well that Jesus was innocent so he had to choose between principle and his own career. He chose his career. This is made very clear when he asks Jesus, "what is truth?" in verse 38. It's not that he didn't understand truth, but that he wanted to avoid having to face the truth.

It seems to me that we find the very same thing in our society today. Our culture wants to deny that there is any such thing as absolute truth. You'll often hear something like, "you have your truth and I have mine." But understand this, whenever someone says that, what they are really saying is that they don't like the truth and so they are trying to find a way to deny it. Jesus physical suffering was the result of Pilate trying to serve his own desires, regardless of the cost to others. The same thing happens today. When we put our own desires ahead of God's desires, people suffer.

The next statement is that we believe Jesus was crucified, dead and buried. This is basically a statement of a historical fact. But it's in the creed because from the beginning people have denied that it actually happened. Today there are lots of people, even people in churches, even pastors, who will tell you that Jesus didn't really die. One of the theories

that's been around for centuries is that he merely "swooned" or passed out from the pain, but in the cool tomb he revived and so it appeared that he was back from the dead.

But from what we know about crucifixion and especially what we know about the torture that Jesus went through before he was crucified, it is impossible that he could have survived it, much less recovered his strength in a tiny cave that was sealed up with no source of fresh air, without any kind of medical care. Just the blood that he lost from being nailed to the cross and having his side pierced with a spear, likely puncturing his heart and lungs, would have been impossible to recover from. No, the point of this statement in the Creed is for us to confess that Jesus really was dead, in every sense of the word. This is vitally important because without the real death of Jesus, there is no real resurrection and our faith is a fraud.

Perhaps even more important for us to understand is that Jesus suffered. He experienced real pain. We don't believe in a God who can't understand what it means to suffer. We believe in a God who came and experienced pain and suffering. When we experience hardship or suffering, we can be comforted knowing that our Savior has been there. He has already walked through the valley of the shadow of death and is ready to walk through it with us.

But even more important is for us to know and believe that Jesus' suffering is the source of our redemption. It's what repairs the damaged relationship between God and us. Jesus suffered and died to take *our* place. We're the ones who deserved the punishment, but

Jesus, who didn't deserve it, took our place.

That brings us to the third part of this article in the Apostles' Creed, "He descended into hell." This is the phrase that seems to generate a lot of controversy among Christians. What do we mean that Jesus descended into hell? To make this more confusing, in the Bible the word "hell" doesn't always mean what we think of as hell, with fire and torment. It is also used to mean the place of the dead.

This morning we don't have the time to get into understanding the different interpretations of the biblical idea of hell. So for this message, let's say that at the minimum we can all agree that hell is separation from God. Hell is where God is not. So one way to understand what we mean when we say Jesus "descended into hell," is that on the cross He experienced the full alienation from his heavenly Father that judgment required.

I don't think any of us can even begin to comprehend what it was for the very Son of God to suffer separation from His Father as punishment for *our* sins. "At that moment, Jesus fully identifies himself with fallen humanity, separated from God by sin." This is

why Jesus cries out using the words of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" As bad as the physical pain must have been, the spiritual pain of punishment for all humanity's sin was far worse.

Ultimately, the full meaning of Christ's descent into hell is a mystery that we can only confess without fully understanding. I think Clayton Bell, who was pastor of Highland Park Presbyterian in Dallas for many years, summed it up best when he wrote, "God has left us with some degree of doubt in this matter in order to impress upon us that God did much more for us through the death of Jesus Christ than we have begun to realize or any one interpretation can grasp."

The important thing for us to remember is that Christ has conquered death. You and I no longer need to fear death because, as the Apostle Paul wrote, "if we are united with Christ in a death like his, we will surely be united with him in a resurrection like his." We also no longer have to worry about being punished for our sins. When we repent and confess those sins to Christ, he is faithful to forgive us because He has already paid the price for our forgiveness. In the meantime, as we experience pain and suffering in this life, we know that Jesus understands and that He is present with us. That's what we need to focus on during Lent and every day of the year.

Amen.