

“BORN FOR THIS: Born to Die”

Matthew 27:45-66

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • December 7, 2014

Recently Leslie and I attended the staff Christmas party for the school where she teaches. The highlight of the evening is a white elephant style gift exchange where everyone draws a number and then either opens a present or steals one from someone else. The difference at this party is that all of the gifts are decorative crosses. Some were made of wood, some metal, some were ceramic. But as we had fun “stealing” each other’s crosses, I began to think about what a strange thing it is that we consider a cross a thing of beauty and even decorate our houses with them.

As we discussed last week, crucifixion – execution on a cross – was the most brutal punishment ever devised. It was so cruel that the Romans refused to use it on their own citizens. So the cross symbolizes that extreme cruelty. As the old hymn puts it, the cross is an emblem of suffering and shame. I am confident that most of you don’t decorate your homes with other forms of torture and execution. So what is different about the cross? In a word, *everything*.

The death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus are the most important doctrines of the Christian faith. Every week we say the Apostle’s Creed together because it’s a reminder of what we believe as Christians. Right there in the creed we affirm that Jesus was crucified, died, and was buried. In 1 Corinthians 15, the Apostle Paul wrote, “I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.” The fact that Jesus died on the cross and was buried is of “first importance.” He also said in the same letter, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” In a few minutes we will share the Lord’s Supper together and we will hear 1 Corinthians 11:26, “As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup you proclaim the

Lord’s death until he comes.”

Since Jesus’ death is so central to our faith, let’s spend a few minutes looking at it closely. The first thing we see from this passage is that Jesus’ death is accompanied by supernatural signs, which reminds us of his birth. In a way, all of the gospel of Matthew has been leaning forward to this point and now the first sign is darkness. “Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour.” From noon until 3 p.m. it was dark. By the way, this was not a solar eclipse. A solar eclipse only lasts a few minutes, not three hours. And besides, this was Passover, which took place during a full moon and it’s impossible to have an eclipse during a full moon.

Rather, this darkness was supernatural. In the Bible, darkness is often used to represent God’s judgment. In this case, Jesus is bearing the judgment of God on sin. He is experiencing the “outer darkness” personally. In those hours Jesus suffered the punishment for all sin. But the darkness was also a grace of God so that people would not look at Jesus while he went through the suffering.

At the end of the period of darkness Jesus cried out to the Father and died. At that moment, the huge curtain in the temple tore from top to bottom. This curtain was 80 feet tall and was a thick, woven tapestry. It would have taken tremendous force to tear it. The point is that God tore the curtain in half, much like the high priest tore his clothes at Jesus’ trial. The curtain was there to keep sinful people out of the presence of God. Once Jesus had accomplished forgiveness for us, there was no longer any need for the priests. God’s presence is now directly available to each and every one of us. We can now go to God without being afraid.

The last third of the passage is about Jesus’ burial. The Romans ordinarily didn’t permit burial for people who were crucified, especially for traitors. It was part of the disgrace of

crucifixion. Matthew tells us that a rich man from Arimathea named Joseph went to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body and then buried Jesus in his own personal tomb. We don't know much about Joseph but we know it was costly for him to bury Jesus. Mark and Luke tell us that Joseph was a respected member of the Council. He was one of the members of the Sanhedrin. Burying Jesus probably cost him his position and his prestige. By handling Jesus' body, Joseph was also now ceremonially unclean so he couldn't participate in Passover. Third, we're told that Joseph was a disciple of Jesus. He has had his faith shattered.

Many people struggle at this point in the story of Jesus. The question is almost always the same. Why did Jesus have to die? The answer is love. This is why Jesus was born. He was born to die so that we don't have to experience what he did. Jesus died to pay the price for our sin. He suffered the punishment that you and I deserve. At the very beginning of the Bible, in the account of creation, God tells Adam that if he disobeys his one command, he shall surely die. Of course Adam and Eve *do* disobey and so death enters the world. Romans 6:23 says, "the wages of sin is death." James 1:15 says, "desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death."

God is holy and so can't have anything to do with sin. Something must be done. In biblical language, we call this process *atonement*. Atonement means making things right between us and God. But as it turns out, only God can do anything about it and the Bible shows us how God deals with our sin by showing us why Jesus died. The first is called *substitutionary atonement*. Jesus took all of our sin and died in our place. The Old Testament system of animal sacrifices pointed to this. The animals, which were supposed to be perfect, were sacrificed as a substitute for the sins of the people. But the sacrifices only pointed to the need for a better substitute. They pointed to the need for the Messiah. Jesus died at 3 p.m. which was the exact time when sacrifices in the Temple began. Jesus was the spotless lamb.

The second reason Jesus died was as a ransom. Jesus said, "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." The idea is not so much of paying a kidnapping ransom but redeeming a slave. Jesus paid the price to redeem us from slavery to sin. As Paul says, "You are not your own, you were bought with a price." We are free from slavery to sin because of Jesus' death. That doesn't mean we're free to do whatever we want. Instead, we are now slaves or servants of Christ. He has a claim on your life.

The third thing that Jesus' death accomplished was to conquer death once for all. Death is God's last enemy. But Jesus has removed the sting of death so that we no longer have to be afraid of dying. If you are a follower of Jesus you know that you will live with Christ forever. That's the real meaning of the baptism we just celebrated. Romans 6 makes this clear: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."

The passage ends with the chief priests and Pharisees worried about Jesus coming out of the tomb. They go back to Pilate and ask him to post a guard, which does. They seem to understand that Jesus claimed he would rise from the dead and they want to protect themselves from that happening. Now you have heard why Jesus died. You have heard that he died for you. You have heard the supernatural evidence that accompanied his death, proving that Jesus is who he said he is, that he is God. The question for you today is this: are you trying to protect yourself from him? Or have you committed your life to him, willing to give up everything for the One who gave up everything for you?

Amen