

THE DEATH OF JESUS
Randall Tremba
March 29, 2015
Palm/Passion Sunday
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

* * *

Mark 15:1-39

When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land. At three o'clock Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Then he gave a loud cry and breathed his last.

* * *

Did Jesus die for our sins? Well, as you know, that's been said over and over again in sermons, Sunday school classes and at least ten thousand gospel songs and hymns. But what does that mean? What does it mean that Jesus died for the sins of the world?

Does it mean what so many people think it means—that an angry God could only be appeased by the death of his only begotten son; that only the death of a pure, innocent lamb could cancel our enormous guilt? Is that what it means?

I don't recall Jesus ever pointing to that sort of God. Not even close. Jesus pointed to a God who is like a mother, like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child. Jesus pointed to a God who is like a shepherd searching all through the night to bring one lost sheep home—with no hint of guilt or punishment.

How in the world did we ever allow that other kind of God to get into our theology, hymns, movies, and art?

Well, an answer to that question would take a major lecture or two. But let me just say this much this morning: thanks to a medieval, philosopher monk named Anselm of Canterbury, for the past 1000 years western churches, namely Catholics, Protestants, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, and, yes, Presbyterians, have been obsessed with a horrid notion called "the substitutionary theory of atonement."

That theory claims that since every single human is born in sin and is infinitely guilty, only an infinite punishment can satisfy the infinite requirements of God's holy law. According to this theory, if God just let us slide by with a universal amnesty, God's justice would be mocked.

Thus, the necessity of eternal damnation in Hell. And, thus, the substitutionary death of Jesus for our sins. Jesus took the punishment, paid full price, so we wouldn't have to. We are all condemned to eternal damnation but Jesus took our place, or so this theory goes. But that is hardly the only or oldest way of understanding the death of Jesus.

The Saturday after Easter I will lead a memorial service here for David Ruhala. David died last December. He was Russian Orthodox by birth and an enthusiastic friend of this church. Before he died he gave me a book, *The Orthodox Church* by Timothy Ware.

As it turn out, our brothers and sisters in the eastern churches, namely Russian, Romanian, and Greek Orthodox, those sorts of churches, never fell for that grisly court room, legal exchange picture of guilt and punishment. Jesus, so say the eastern churches, died to destroy the grip of death, to destroy our fear of death, and to fill death and all deaths with dignity and hope; *and not to appease some angry, vengeful God.*

As far as I can tell, Jesus never offered to die on our behalf. I'm pretty sure he said, come along and join me on this path, this path of justice and compassion. It could lead to mockery, scorn and death. But it will be worth it. So have your cross ready just in case *and do not be afraid.*

One way is the way of substitution. *Let Jesus do it for me.* The other is the way of participation. *Take up your cross and come with me.*

Did Jesus die for the sins of the world? Keep that question in mind as I tell you this story taken from *Night*, a book by Jewish author and holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel.

“One day, as we returned from work to the concentration camp, we saw three gallows. Three prisoners in chains—one, a child.

The head of the camp read the verdict. All eyes were on the child as he stood in the shadow of the gallows.

The three condemned prisoners stepped onto chairs. Nooses were placed around their necks.

‘Where is merciful God, where is He?’ someone behind me asked.

The chairs were tipped over.

Then came our ritualistic march past the victims. The two men were dead. But the third rope was still moving; the child was still breathing. And so he remained for more than half an hour, writhing before our eyes.

Behind me, I heard: ‘For God’s sake, where is God?’

And from within me, I heard a voice answer: This is where, right here, hanging from these gallows.”

What if the only way God can save us is by hanging on a cross in Palestine, or from gallows in Germany, or from a lynching tree in Mississippi? What if we have to keep looking at the crucifixion of innocents—the children slain in Sandy Hook, Matthew Shepard lashed to a fence in Wyoming, hostages beheaded in Iraq, civilians killed by drones in Afghanistan, or young black men gunned down in America.

What if we have to keep looking at the crucifixion of innocents—Jesus crucified, lynched, beaten, raped again and again by the collusion of state and religion while we stand at a distance? Is that not the sin of the world for which or *because of which* Jesus died? What if we have to keep looking at the crucifixion of innocents until God awakens in our hearts, until love rises up again and again?

Fifty years ago, many people heard about Selma. But only when images were televised, did everything change.

What if the only way God can save us is by hanging from the gallows? What kind of God is that? What kind of God hangs out with victims of society?

That may not be the God we want; but that’s the kind of God Jesus serves.

The story of the three gallows led me to another story, the story of Mother Maria of Paris.

Maria was born in Russia and given the name Elizabeth. After her father’s sudden death she became an atheist, then a Bolshevik, then a mother of an illegitimate child, and then twice divorced all before becoming a nun. (*Tell me again your qualifications to be a nun?*) She began her journey back to Christianity because, as she said, “Christ also died. He sweated blood. They struck his face.”

Christ also died. He sweated blood. They struck his face.

Maria got the crucifixion right. God is present even in godforsaken deaths and in godforsaken causes. In Jesus all our fears die away.

Maria took her name in memory of St. Mary of Egypt, a prostitute who became an

extreme and crazed ascetic. Which prompted Olivier Clement to say: "If we love and venerate Mother Maria, it is not in spite of her disorder, strange views and passion. It is precisely these qualities that make her so extraordinarily alive among so many bland and pious saints. Though unattractive, dirty and disheveled, she was truly alive in her suffering, her compassion, and her passion."

Soon after moving to Paris, Maria saw Nazis hauling Jews to extermination camps. She devised a plan to save children by convincing certain garbage collectors to hide Jewish children in trashcans and haul them to safe havens. Hence the title of the book by Jim Forest: *Silent as a Stone: Mother Maria of Paris and the Trash Can Rescue*.

In 1943, Maria was arrested and sent to Ravensbrück camp. As fate—or as faith—would have it, she took the place of a Jewish woman condemned to the gas chamber. Mother Maria died Easter Sunday 1945, 70 years ago, just eight days before the Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed for the attempted assassination of Adolf Hitler.

Bonhoeffer was the author of the universally acclaimed book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. The most famous sentence in that book is this: "When Christ calls us, he bids us come and die."

* * *

Jesus, you go before us—
bearing the cross of this world.

Jesus, you go before us—
bringing hope forever to this world.

Jesus, you go before us—
showing the way in these holy days.

Accept the praise we offer.
Accept the prayers we bring.
Teach us the way of love.