

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Psalm 27

Acts 2:14-42

March 5, 2017, First Sunday in Lent

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

Journey to the Cross

CRUCIFIED, BUT LORD AND MESSIAH

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Nancy and I graduated from Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, VA on Sunday, May 22, 1983. Later that week, we were examined for ordination at a called meeting of the Presbytery of Albemarle in Watts Chapel on the seminary campus. We moved to Rocky Mount, NC and began work on Wednesday, June 1 as associate pastors of the First Presbyterian Church. Our first Sunday in worship was June 5. On Friday, June 10, the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (the northern Presbyterian Church) and the Presbyterian Church in the United States (the southern Presbyterian Church) reunited at the General Assembly meeting in Atlanta after 122 years of separation, dating back to the Civil War. On Sunday, June 26, Nancy and I were ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament.

Sometime within the first week or ten days we were at First Prez, Bill Batchelor, an elder at the church called me and asked me if I could preach on Sunday, June 19 at the Mt. Pisgah (United) Presbyterian Church in Rocky Mount. Bill was the city manager of Rocky Mount. Mt. Pisgah is an African-American Presbyterian congregation and, until June 10, had been a member congregation of the former “northern” Presbyterian Church. I told Bill I could and would preach at Mt. Pisgah.

The title of my sermon that day was “Reunion — And Now Unity?” Not counting one or two sermons for preaching class and my ordination sermon in Watts Chapel three weeks earlier, this was the first sermon I had preached. To say I was nervous is a vast understatement! As I began preaching that day, the congregation began to talk and call out to me. At first, it threw me a bit, but the more I preached, the more I appreciated the interaction. I kept that sermon in my files for years. Every once in a while, I would get it out and read it. Thursday I looked for the sermon in the file cabinet in my study and I couldn’t find it. After searching for a few minutes, I remembered that I threw it away several years ago — it was so bad! But I will always remember with a grateful heart the kindness and generosity of the good folks at the Mt. Pisgah (United) Presbyterian Church in Rocky Mount who sat through a rookie’s first sermon!

Even though the Mt. Pisgah folks were gracious, my first sermon didn’t have the same results as Peter’s first sermon in Jerusalem. Luke tells us, “Now when they heard it, they were cut to the heart . . . they asked Peter, ‘What should we do?’ . . . those who welcomed his message were baptized and that day about three thousand persons were added.” (Acts 2:37-41)

It may seem strange to hear a Pentecost story read and preached on this first Sunday in Lent. But there's a reason I picked this story to begin the journey to the cross on the Sundays of Lent 2017. Peter's sermon is a defense of himself and his fellow disciples: "They're not drunk as you suppose, it's only 9:00 a.m." Peter's sermon is also the proclamation of the gospel in a nutshell. Peter tells the new story of what God has done in Jesus Christ within the old, old story of God's purpose and plan. Finally, the theme of Peter's sermon is clearly laid out in v. 36: "Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified."

[Let me step outside the biblical text for just a minute and make an important point. Acts 2:36 (along with some other stories from the New Testament) has a tragic history of being misused/misread/misunderstood/misapplied to blame **all** Jews in **every** time and **every** place as "Christ-killers." Notice, though, that Peter is a Jew, preaching to Jews, about the Jewish Messiah, at a Jewish festival. Note that all of Jesus' disciples were Jews and that many Jews heard Jesus' call and followed him. If anything, this is a family issue. Peter, who himself had denied even knowing Jesus and abandoned Jesus in his hour of need, must have choked on the words, "this Jesus whom you crucified." In this season of Lent, which is traditionally a time for self-reflection and thinking about the amazing grace and love of Jesus Christ on the cross, we need to be careful about pointing fingers at others. After all, the people there that day were "cut to the heart" and asked, "What should we do?"]

What should we do? That's a good question to ask as we begin the Lenten journey to the cross. Just a few minutes ago we sang "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" Of course, the answer for all of us is "No!" . . . at least not literally, but . . .

The origins of that melancholy and mournful song are unclear. In 1899 William E. Barton published *Old Plantation Songs* and "Were You There" was included in a section called "Recent Negro Melodies." That song had four stanzas: Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Were you there when they nailed him to the tree? Were you there when they pierced him in the side? Were you there when the sun refused to shine? At some point, a fifth verse was added: Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?

The song is a call to remember what happened 2000 years ago on a hill called Calvary. But the song is also a call to "re-member." It brings what happened to Jesus on the cross into the midst of what's happening in life right now. The song makes what happened on Good Friday a part of our lives and our lives a part of what happened on Good Friday. African-American slaves "re-membered" the suffering of Jesus Christ. By asking "Were you there?" they claimed Jesus Christ knew their sufferings and stood with them in their suffering. The "re-membering" of Jesus Christ on the cross also helped them "re-member" God's promise of power and resurrection.

Our *Glory to God* hymnal has a sixth (optional) verse. Traditionally this verse is not sung until Easter Sunday. If you will please turn to Hymn #228, we're going to break with tradition and sing that final sixth verse: "Were you there when he rose up from the dead?"

[Congregation sings v. 6.]

When we sing all six verses, we are preaching Peter's sermon, especially his closing statement: "God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified." Two other times in his sermon, Peter talks about "this man, handed over and crucified" and "this Jesus God raised up." Although we usually use the Apostles' Creed for our Affirmation of Faith in worship, there's a reason we are saying something different today. Today's Affirmation of Faith is taken directly from Philippians 2:5-11, called the Christ hymn. Scholars think this is an early Christian hymn that Paul used in his letter to the Christians at Philippi in order to make the same point Peter was preaching in Jerusalem: "Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God . . . humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him . . . and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord." The "re-membering" of Jesus Christ on the cross helps us "re-member" God's promise of power and resurrection.

But we are sadly mistaken — and we drain the cross of its meaning — if we think that Christ's resurrection glory erased the horror and cost of Jesus' cross. Years ago, when we were living in Richmond, Nancy and I attended a church and got involved in a Sunday School class. One Sunday we were talking about the cross and its meaning. One woman — well-intentioned, I am sure — said she thought the crucifixion probably wasn't that big a deal or all that difficult for Jesus to bear, since Jesus knew he was going to be raised up from the dead. She was saying what so many of us think, because thinking about what happened to Jesus on the cross is just too painful and shameful. And we hear that song playing in our head . . . "Were you there when they crucified my Lord? nailed him to the tree? pierced him in the side? laid him in the tomb?"

If the cross of Jesus Christ is a stumbling block for us, that's nothing new. Remember what Paul wrote back in the day: "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. . . For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." (1 Cor. 1:18, 21-24)

We display crosses throughout our church. We wear crosses around our necks and carry them in our pockets. We put crosses on our car bumpers. But how much is the cross a stumbling block to us today? Does the cross of Jesus Christ seem foolish to you? Are we embarrassed by the cross? Have we sentimentalized and sanitized the cross? Is the cross offensive? More important than that, is the cross of Jesus Christ a matter of indifference?

You may have heard it said, "You have to go through Good Friday to get to Easter Sunday." Literally, that's true on the calendar. We have to go through Friday, April 14 to get to Sunday, April 16. But there is a deeper, theological significance to the statement. The sermons on the Sundays of Lent after today will be based on stories from Mark's gospel, in which Jesus talks about himself over and over again as "the suffering Son of Man." I have named this sermon series "Journey to the Cross." The in-

spiration for these sermons came from the Holy Spirit and from a conversation with Karla about the choir's Good Friday cantata, "Come to the Cross and Remember."

What does Peter's sermon have to do with us today? In light of the story of our second hymn, we might call Pepper Choplin's cantata, "Come to the Cross and **Re-Member**." We "re-member" what happened on Good Friday and make it a part of our lives and our lives a part of what happened on Good Friday. The "re-remembering" of Jesus Christ on the cross helps us "re-member" God's promise of power and resurrection.

I hope the weekly margin notes in our bulletin are helpful and thought-provoking for you. On the back of today's bulletin there is a quote from Stanley Hauerwas, "The cross is not a symbol for general human suffering and oppression. Rather, the cross is a sign of what happens when one takes God's account of reality more seriously than Caesar's. The cross stands as God's (and our) eternal no to the powers of death, as well as God's eternal yes to humanity."¹ In light of Peter's sermon and that thought from Hauerwas, it's appropriate that we're having a mission program about "What Is Our Why?" on this first Sunday in Lent. As I was working on today's sermon (based on a Pentecost story on the first Sunday in Lent), I came across this thought that fits perfectly with Peter's sermon, "Were You There," "What Is Our Why?" and the cross of Jesus Christ:

"[This is] the wonderful and important opportunity to reframe congregational activities in the context of the church's original experience with the Spirit. When a congregation shares this experience, all the administrative work, the meetings, the efforts to remain financially stable, all that energy is tied to a purpose that empowers it. On the other hand, when that vision of the church's primary experience is forgotten and not shared, a congregation finds itself tired and shrinking."²

This Lenten season is a time to reflect on the life and death of Jesus Christ as we go on the journey to the cross. It is a time to "re-member" Christ crucified, but Lord and Messiah.

And this Lenten season is a time for us to think about these questions: Were you there? and What should we do?

Let us pray: God of the covenant, in the glory of the cross your Son embraced the power of death and broke its hold over your people. In this time of repentance, draw all people to yourself, that we who confess Jesus as Lord may put aside the deeds of death and accept the life of your kingdom. Amen.

NOTES

¹Stanley Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*.

²I should have written down this reference, but I can't find it in my notes!