

A New Day with God
Mark 15:25-39
April 14, 2017 – Good Friday

The crucifixion narrative in Mark's Gospel is among the riches writing in the entire Gospel literature. How often have I stated that God's loves us so much that God took on human form, to live our life, to walk with us, to teach us, to heal us, and ultimately to die our death, the most horrendous death we can imagine. So why the crucifixion?

Theologians have a word for it. They call it atonement. That's one of those nice, long theological terms; but what does it mean? Well, every beginning theology text I have ever read breaks the word down into at-one-ment. With the death of Jesus Christ, God somehow becomes one with humanity, and we become one with God in Christ. Oh, that's not saying that we somehow become divine or perfect. But it is saying that we enter into a new relationship with the divine, a relationship that that is truly "up close and personal."

It's in his Letter to the Romans that Paul writes: "God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us."(Romans 5:8) Indeed, God loved us so much as to suffer and die for us; and, in the Gospel of John, Jesus says, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."(John 15:13)

But, back to the Gospel of Mark... One of my favorite verses in the Gospel is the statement that, when Jesus breathed his last, the temple curtain was torn in two from top to bottom.(Mark 15:38) The symbolism of this is huge. You see, within the Jewish temple, there was the nave, the central worship space in the temple, where observant Jewish men, and yes, only men, would gather to worship. Then there was the Holy of Holies. This was the central part of the temple; and it was believed that the true presence of God dwelled within the Holy of Holies. The temple curtain separated the nave from the Holy of Holies. Only the high priest was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies, and only once a year, on Yom Kipper. It was be as if we had a large curtain separating our Chancel from the congregation, and only I was allowed to pass through the curtain and only on Good Friday. But, with the death of Jesus, the temple curtain was torn in two, torn down. The division between God and humanity was no more. With the death of Jesus, humans were invited into a new relationship with God, a relationship that was up close and personal. There was no separation. There were no longer only special days when one could approach God. One did not need special ordination to approach God. No, with the death of Jesus, Humanity, you and I, were invited to be "at one" with the divine, to speak with the divine, to respond to the divine call,

to worship and serve and love the divine – up close and personal. Indeed the death of Jesus ushered in a whole new day.

But then, there is the second part of Mark’s crucifixion story. Who are “the we” that are invited into the new relationship with God. Only Mark has the centurion alone giving testimony: “Truly this man was the Son of God!”(Mark 15:39) Do you remember last Sunday we discussed the fact the when Jesus cleansed the temple, when Jesus upset the tables of the money changers, he quote Isaiah: My house shall be a house of prayer for all nations, and I commented that only Mark retained Isaiah’s original words – “for all nations.”(Isaiah 56:7) If you know the Gospel of Mark well, there is this reoccurring theme that scholars refer to as “the messianic secret.” Every time someone in the Gospel of Mark identifies Jesus as the Messiah, he responds by telling them not to tell anyone; and scholars debate as to why Jesus is seeking to keep his Messianic identity “under wraps.” But here, at the very end, at the crucifixion, it’s not one of the disciples, it’s not one of his followers, it’s not even a Jew that testifies to Jesus true identity. No, it’s a Roman Officer. Friends, that’s significant. It’s a total outsider that testifies that Jesus is the Son of God.

The temple curtain is torn in two, we have personal access to the living God, at all times. And who are the “we”? – Every person on this planet – Jew and Romans, civilians and officers, all people are invited to be at one with God. God so loved the world, the whole world, all the nations. . . God so loved the world, that he give his only Son.

Have you ever thought about the miracle of the cross? The cross is one of the greatest instruments of torture and death that humanity has ever devised. In the first century, the primary sign of Christianity was the fish. The cross was truly despised. Only God in Christ can turn such an item of horror into such a thing of beauty; because only God can give the greatest love the world has ever known. Yes, today the cross has become the symbol of our relationship, our at-one-ment with the living Christ. Indeed the cross has become a thing of beauty.

But there’s more, because God will not settle for some sort of long-distance relationship. God want’s that relationship to truly be up close and personal. But you’ll need to wait until Easter Sunday for that part of the story.

Tonight, let us contemplate the supreme love of God, expressed in the death of Christ, as we enter our service of tenebrae. I refer you to your bulletin for the order of the service, including the responsive readings and hymns. The rest of our service will continue without interruption.

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