
What We See on the Cross

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Cathy Zappa
The Fourth Sunday in Lent – Year B

In last Sunday's lesson from 1 Corinthians, which I'm sure you all remember, Paul called the message about the cross "foolishness to those who are perishing; but to us who are being saved, the power of God" (1:18). Verses like this were reassuring to me so long as I was on the right side of them, which I was sure I was when I was younger and understood everything about being Christian—when I fully understood the cross and why it matters.

It was quite simple, really: somewhere along the way, we humans messed up, badly! And it made God angry, and we couldn't undo what we'd done, or pay the damages we'd incurred, or make God any less angry by ourselves. So God took care of it, by sacrificing his only Son Jesus on the cross to pay for our sins and redeem us from the condemnation we deserved. And Jesus went along with it all, willingly giving up his own life for us.

It made me cry when I really pondered what Jesus went through. It made me grateful. It made me want to let Jesus into my heart. And it made me want to stay on the right side of the law and of God's anger.

But then, the more I saw in life, and the more I let myself think about it and feel the uneasiness that nagged at me, the more it began to unravel. Jesus' suffering and execution were heartbreaking! Cruel and violent. If God was so loving, how could God do this, or allow it to happen? If God was so powerful, couldn't God have found another way? Was this a God I could believe in?

I found myself on the wrong side of Paul's equation. I wasn't among those being saved. I was perishing. I wasn't even sure I could call myself a Christian anymore, and for a time I fell out of the habit of church.

But there was another way. Many other ways. Many other faithful ways to see.

Like Nicodemus who came to Jesus at night with a question he was embarrassed to ask in daylight, I slipped in the backdoor of an Episcopal Church, listened in on sermons and classes, and eventually joined some Bible studies. And I heard, again and again, that God *is* a good and loving God. I saw that our scriptures and liturgies are filled with stories and images and metaphors for the atoning work of Jesus Christ—that our tradition includes so many ways that faithful people have tried to put words around this mystery of the cross and its role in salvation.

One of them is the legal metaphor of Jesus bearing the punishment deserved by another. There's also the financial metaphor of paying a debt or ransom. The militaristic defeat of forces of evil and death. The Jewish Paschal lamb or great high priest. The ritual sacrifice of a scapegoat. There's Jesus the shepherd laying down his life for his sheep, Jesus the body that becomes bread of life, Jesus the moral influencer. Yes, even in Jesus' day, there were influencers!

In today's reading, Jesus offers yet another metaphor. During that nighttime visit, when Nicodemus comes to Jesus with a question disguised as an answer, Jesus tries to draw Nicodemus beyond what he thinks he knows into mystery. Jesus talks first about being born again, from above; but this figurative language sails right past Nicodemus' literalistic thinking. So Jesus tries again, with a story that Nicodemus knows well from the Book of Numbers.

It's the story about the Israelites in the wilderness, whose relentless complaining finally snaps God's patience in two. At his wits' end, God sends fiery serpents among them. The serpents bite (as serpents do!), and many

Israelites die.

That detail is an awkward one for many of us today; it's not something I believe God would do. But we'll save that discussion for another day and focus instead on the part that Jesus focuses on: the people see the snakes as judgment of their sin, acknowledge what they've done wrong, and ask Moses to ask God to take the serpents away. When Moses prays, God tells him to take one of these same serpents and set it on a pole. Everyone who is bitten and who looks at it will live.

It is a moment of judgment: the recognition of truth and the beginning of repentance. When they look at it, they see their sin and fear and impatience and discontent and lack of trust. They see their mortality, and the physical and spiritual dangers around them. And they see the God who has delivered them and provided for them before, who is with them now, and who restores them to life.

And Jesus said, *"Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."*

Like the Israelites looking up at that serpent, when we look up at the cross, we see what we're capable of doing to one another. We see our capacity for betrayal, violence, cruelty, and cowardice. We see the shadow sides of ourselves, things we have done and left undone, which we dread coming to light or being exposed. We see the cycle of violence and fear played out, and what it costs to refuse to play along.

Like the Israelites looking up at the deadly serpent, we see our own mortality. We see suffering. Suffering we have known, suffering we have seen, suffering we have caused, suffering we fear.

And. And we see life. We see God. We see that God so loved the world that he sent his Son Jesus Christ to dwell with us. To live and die as one of us. To restore all people to God and one another. And to raise us up with him at the last day.

When we look up at the cross, we see the incarnation, too, and the resurrection and ascension. We see the whole story. We see the cross in the light of the whole story, and in the light of God's love. Love that, as we sang, mingles with sorrow, and imbues this symbol of brokenness with the power to heal. Love that brings to light our own brokenness and interrupts our destructive ways. Love that turns poison into anti-venom, an instrument of death into a means of eternal life. We see love that saves the whole world.

When we look up at that love, we are confronted with a critical decision. How will we answer this love? Will we love God back? Will we love others as Jesus loved us? Will we let ourselves be loved?

If we bear in us the potential for life and for death, for cruelty and for compassion, for harm and for healing, which will we choose?

How do our own stories and experiences shed light on the cross? What images and metaphors do they offer? And how does God's love for the world shed light on our stories and experiences, and on the crosses that break our hearts today?

The questions hang in the air. The long, faithful conversation continues in us.