

24 Hours That Changed the World: The Crucifixion
Romans 5:6-11 and Mark 15:25-39
Palm/Passion Sunday: April 9, 2017
M. Michelle Fincher
Calvary Presbyterian Church

Over the past five Sundays we have gone with Jesus to the Upper Room where he observed the Passover Seder with his disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane where he prayed and was arrested. We have followed him to the house of the High Priest where he was put on trial before the Sanhedrin, then to Pilate's house where he appeared in front of the Roman governor before Pilate's soldiers tortured and humiliated him. Our journey with Jesus through the last 24 hours of his life now brings us to the cross.

The Romans, as we have seen, practiced crucifixion as a means of striking fear in the hearts of the people; and they did so for 800 years. It was a terrifying death, executed publicly so that those who witnessed it were not then inclined to violate Roman law. Seneca said that if you knew there was a likelihood you would be arrested and crucified, it was better to commit suicide. Cicero called crucifixion the "extreme and ultimate punishment of slaves" and the "cruellest and most disgusting penalty." Josephus called it "the most pitiable of deaths."

Crucifixions were an extremely effective crime deterrent, since they took place along the main thoroughfares where people would see them. The vertical beam was left in place at the site. The criminal, after he was flogged, carried the crossbeam, which could weigh a hundred pounds. Victims were typically left hanging, or their bodies were taken down and left on the ground near the cross until the animals were finished with them. Some of the bodies were placed on a trash heap. Ordinarily there was no allowance by the Roman government for people to come and take the bodies, but in Jerusalem, people were allowed to bury their dead after crucifixion.

As we saw last week, the goal of crucifixion was to inflict the maximum agony for the longest possible time. Some victims could hang on the cross for days before they finally died. Depending on what was convenient for the Romans, the victim's arms could be nailed to the cross at the wrists, which were considered part of the hands; or the arms could be tied to the cross with ropes. It seems the feet were always nailed in place.

Discoveries and research in the past 50 years have challenged some of our early ideas about crucifixion. It has been common to imagine the crucified Jesus at a considerable height off the ground, but it is now believed that most crosses were no more than nine feet tall. Allowing room at the top for the sign that named the victim's crime, that would mean that his feet were at most three feet off the ground. Jesus, then, would have been hanging on the cross just two or three feet above his mother, John, the soldiers and those who hurled insults at him. He could look into their eyes, and they could look into his. If you can visualize standing on a chair beside someone standing on the floor, that will give you an idea of the proximity of Jesus to those at the foot of the cross.

Some people believe asphyxiation was a common cause of death among the crucified. Hanging on a cross, it was extremely difficult to exhale without raising yourself up. The longer you hung there, the more exhausted you became, and the more difficult it was to push yourself up to exhale. Breathing became more and more shallow, so that crucifixion became a slow death by asphyxiation. Others believe a buildup of fluid around the heart would have caused congestive heart failure first. A loss of fluids and subsequent dehydration is also a possible cause of death, as is hypovolemic shock. Others see these factors acting in combination. What we know for certain is that this was an very effective way to torture someone for a long period of time. Jesus, bloodied and naked, hung that way for six hours.

Throughout Lent we have examined why the Jewish religious leaders, the crowd, and the Romans wanted to crucify Jesus, but we still need to ask: why did Jesus seem to face this death so willingly, to embrace it as part of his mission? And why did God send Jesus to Earth, knowing this would happen?

We've already looked at two theories of the Atonement. The substitutionary theory says that Jesus takes our place, receiving the punishment humanity deserves for sin. The subjective or moral influence theory states that Jesus' suffering and death demonstrate the depth of sin and the breadth of God's love in a way that is meant to move us to repentance and to a deep desire to follow God. This morning we'll look at a third theory, the sacrificial offering theory, but to understand this view, we need to understand something of the Jewish sacrificial system.

As early as Genesis chapter 4, we see human beings bringing sacrificial offerings to God. Grain, animals, wine, oil and monetary gifts were presented to God by men and women as expressions of gratitude, devotion, and worship. In bringing those offerings, believers were united with God. When I give an offering to the church, I do that not simply to meet Calvary's budget and certainly not to try

to win points with God. My offering is an outward expression of my gratitude and my worship. But, it is also more than that. It is a tangible way for me to say that I want to belong wholly to God, to honor and love God and to make God a priority in my life. It is a demonstration of my trust in God. In our relationships with one another, we often give gifts that express our appreciation, love and devotion to each other.

Sacrificial offerings can also be part of the process of expressing sorrow or repentance. When we hurt someone we care about, we want to make it right, to acknowledge our transgression and ask for forgiveness. So, we might leave our spouse a note, or cook their favorite meal, or look for some way to bless them as an expression of regret and of the desire to restore your relationship. It's not that you cannot be forgiven without making these kinds of gestures. We routinely receive forgiveness without offering a gift to the one we have hurt. But, there are moments when the giving of a token to express one's regret makes a difference.

In our relationship with God there is a need to acknowledge our sin, to repent of it, and to seek to make things right. In the OT, God made provision for the people to make amends and be restored to right relationship by making sin or guilt offerings. These offerings were a way to say, "I'm sorry for what I did. This is a visible expression of my remorse and my repentance. Forgive me and make me clean again." With such an offering, people could feel relieved of guilt and restored in their relationship with God, so it became a regular part of worship.

Then, once a year, on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, there were special sacrifices. The high priest offered a bull as a sacrifice for his own sins and the sins of his family. Afterward, he was to bathe, then go alone into the Holy of Holies where the ark of the covenant, the presence of God, resided. He would offer a goat as a sacrifice to God on behalf of all the people, and then repeat the liturgy of Yom Kippur: "God, with this goat's blood I offer this sacrifice, a living creature dying that you might forgive these people. I come on their behalf, pleading with you to forgive their sins and remember the sins no more." It was a powerful drama demonstrating the seriousness of sin and the willingness of God to forgive. The point of this sacrifice, along with the guilt offerings, was not to turn away God's wrath but to express the people's repentance and their desire to be reconciled to God.

Once the goat was offered for the sins of the people, the priest would take a second goat and figuratively place the sins of the people upon it. This was the scapegoat, which was led away from the community and sent out into the

wilderness. The people came to understand that, just as that goat had gone away, never to be seen again, their sins had also been carried away.

The sacrificial offering theory of atonement looks at the crucifixion through the lens of the OT's sacrificial system. In his death, Jesus acted as the high priest representing all humanity. Throughout his ministry, Jesus had referred to himself as the Son of Man, a title pointing to his role as "representative human being." He was God in the flesh, revealing God to us; but he was also fully human, representing a new humanity that reflected what we were meant to be as human beings. In this capacity, he became our priest and intercessor with God. Like the OT priests, he, too, offered a sacrifice to atone for our sin, to reconcile us with God. But, instead of a goat or a bull, he offered himself. It is another lens through which we may view Jesus' self-giving love. He gave himself to God as an offering on our behalf.

I want to remind us of what we said at the beginning of this sermon series: the Atonement is not so much a theology to be understood as it is a theology for us to live. Even the Gospel writers, who were clear that the suffering and death of Christ were central to God's redemption of the world, did not attempt to spell out precisely *how* Christ's suffering brings about the salvation of humankind. In many ways, Christ's passion is meant to function like a piece of art which speaks in different ways to different people at different times in their lives. From each of the viewpoints there are gifts to be gleaned, lessons to be learned, grace to be received. But no single theory of the atonement can explain how it works.

However you understand the death of Jesus, the fact of its atoning work to restore us to right relationship with God is made clear by the Gospel writers in their description of what happened to the temple veil. "Mark writes, "Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom." (15:37-38) This curtain was the one separating the Holy of Holies—the throne room of God—from the rest of the Temple. It was the one behind which only the high priest could go, and then only once a year, to atone for the sins of the people. By telling us that the curtain was torn apart when Christ died, the Gospels are saying that in his death Jesus atoned for our sins as our high priest. He tore down the curtain that separated humanity from God. He offered us, by his death, reconciliation with God.

As Jesus hung on the cross, some of the soldiers were nearby, gambling for Jesus' clothing. They saw Jesus dying but did not understand what was really happening. They were taking what their limited perspective saw as being of

value—his clothes—while totally missing the infinite value of the eternal life Jesus was offering at that moment. But, Mark tells us that one soldier “stood facing him,” heard his final words and saw how he took his last breath. This soldier, who surely had witnessed multitudes of state-sponsored executions, saw all that took place during those six hours at the crucifixion, and he uttered these immortal words: “Truly this man was the Son of God.”

For one final time in this Lenten journey I invite you to place yourself in this story. Will you be like the soldiers who gambled for Jesus’ clothing, who missed the power and mystery and wonder of the cross, all for a few rags of clothing? Will you finish this Lenten season and go back to the way things were, to being primarily focused on the mundane things of this world? Or will you be like the soldier who, having witnessed Jesus on the cross, was moved to say, “Truly, this man was the Son of God”?