

Take Me to the Cross

Luke 23:26-49

John Breon

When the huge, devastating tornado tore through Moore, OK in 1999, it went through the neighborhood where Nancy's parents lived and destroyed the house Nancy grew up in. Just a couple of blocks north is Moore First Baptist Church, which was not damaged and became a crisis center for the area. In the darkness after the tornado had passed, the cross on the church remained lighted. People in the neighborhood could make their way to the cross to find help.

Many years ago, there was a story about a little boy in London. His mother told him that he could play on their block, but that he was not to cross the street. He lived in a crowded neighborhood where there were many rows of houses that all looked alike. Near his home was an intersection with a park in the middle of it. In the park was a large stone cross on a pedestal.

The little boy became curious, of course. Watching for a break in the traffic, he crossed the street at the corner. He thought he could remember his way home. But before long, he was hopelessly lost. The more he wandered and the more he looked for his home, the more lost he became.

Finally, a policeman found the boy, discovered that he was lost and began questioning him. The boy didn't know where he lived. So the policeman began asking him if he lived near this famous building or that famous monument. Each time the boy replied, "No, I don't know anything about those." Finally the policeman asked if the boy lived anywhere near the big stone cross. The boy's eyes opened wide and he said, "Yes! Take me to the cross! I can get home from there!" (Attributed to Charles Welborn by Cameron Pulliam in Mt. Vernon MO UMC newsletter, April 2003).

Are you feeling lost? I want to bring you to the cross today. That's where we find grace, mercy and forgiveness. Our mission as the church is to bring lost people to the cross so they can get home. "Home" in this case is a right relationship with God and intimate fellowship with God now and forever.

Just days after Jesus entered Jerusalem to shouts of praise, he was betrayed by one of his disciples and arrested as a trouble-maker, a blasphemer and an enemy of Rome. The Jewish ruling council condemned Jesus. The Roman governor, Pilate, questioned Jesus and then sent him to Herod, who ruled Galilee. Unable to get Jesus to perform a miracle, or even speak to him, Herod sent him back to Pilate. Pilate declared that Jesus was innocent. But because the crowd kept shouting for Jesus to be crucified, Pilate gave in, released a murderer from prison and surrendered Jesus to be crucified.

The Roman soldiers led Jesus away. And they seized Simon from Cyrene, laid the cross (that is, the cross beam—the vertical pole stayed at the execution site) on him and made him carry the cross behind Jesus. That's a picture of discipleship. Earlier Jesus had said, "All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow me" (Luke 9:23 CEB).

A large crowd followed Jesus. It included a number of women who mourned and wept for him. But he told them not to weep for him—he was fulfilling God's plan. Instead, they should weep for Jerusalem, which one day would be destroyed because its people failed to see God's coming in Jesus and because they rejected Jesus.

Very simply and briefly Luke reports the event that is at the heart of Christian faith: "When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left" (23:33).

Jesus had been beaten and mocked. Now he was stripped. His hands were nailed to the crossbeam, then it was raised and attached to the vertical pole. Then his feet were nailed to the pole.

Hanging there in pain and humiliation, Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing" (v 34). A little later he will assure a repentant criminal of a place in paradise (v 43). Finally, he will pray again, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (v 46).

Notice who is present at Jesus' crucifixion. The people are there, watching. They have distanced themselves from the leaders a bit, perhaps wondering if Jesus really deserves such punishment. The Jewish rulers are

there, scoffing and mocking. The Roman soldiers are there, doing their job, gambling for Jesus' clothes and also mocking him. The criminals are there, one of them adding his insults and derision to the mocking of Jesus.

And Jesus prays, "Forgive them, they don't know what they are doing." In the Old Testament Law, there was provision of atonement for sins committed in ignorance. Jesus is offering that now. These people are ignorant of who Jesus really is. They call him by titles that truly describe him—Messiah of God, Chosen One, King of the Jews. But they don't really believe those things are true of Jesus. For the Jewish rulers, what Jesus is suffering is proof that he is not God's Messiah or Son. Yet Jesus is still able to call God "Father" all the time he is on the cross. Jesus knows that he is God's Chosen, and that he is fulfilling the Father's plan through his suffering.

"Forgive them." Jews and Gentiles are guilty. Both are present and responsible in the killing of Jesus. And forgiveness is available to both.

Those mocking Jesus speak of salvation. "He saved others; let him save himself." "If you are king of the Jews, save yourself." "Save yourself and us." They are echoing the temptation Jesus heard in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry: "If you are God's Son." Still Jesus refuses to call upon God's power for his own comfort and security. If he saves himself, he can't save others. But by refusing to save himself, he is able to save everyone who will receive salvation.

Then, as if in answer to their misunderstanding and mocking of him as Savior, he saves a man even on the cross. After the first criminal insulted Jesus and demanded, "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" the other criminal rebuked the first one. He admitted that he was being punished justly; he acknowledged that what he had done deserved condemnation and death. Then, surprisingly, he recognizes Jesus as the true King. Throughout Luke's gospel, people of low status or on the fringes of society show remarkable insight into Jesus' identity and his mission. This criminal is the first to recognize that Jesus' death does not contradict his being Messiah and Savior. And he recognizes that Jesus' crucifixion will lead to his enthronement.

This criminal says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And Jesus answers him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise" (v 43). The word "paradise" refers to God's garden. In Jewish thought it wasn't necessarily the final resting place but the place of rest and refreshment before the gift of new life in the resurrection. But it's also an image of new creation. When Jesus promises paradise *today*, we remember that Jesus announced that he was fulfilling God's word *today* and that we still live in the "today" of fulfillment. Salvation is now.

We also see what Luke is trying to show us about Jesus' death: God fulfills his plan through the crucifixion of Jesus, not in spite of it. Jesus can exercise his kingly power of salvation in death as in life. In these vulnerable moments at the end of his life, Jesus continues to fulfill his role as Savior. He continues to carry out his mission: "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10).

What a picture of grace: That a person who had no time and no opportunity to make amends or apologize to his victims, who had no time or opportunity to change his ways, live a different kind of life and do good—this person receives salvation from Jesus and is guaranteed a place in God's new creation this very day. That same grace is available to us right now.

But we mustn't presume that because the criminal on the cross was able to turn to Jesus just before he died that we can put off turning to Jesus until just before we die. It's been said that there is one instance of a so-called death bed conversion in the New Testament so that we will have hope. But there is only one, so that we will not presume. And, if you wait until the end of your life to accept salvation you will have missed a lifetime of grace and joy and fellowship with Jesus. Today is the day. Now is the time.

There are unusual signs that occur as Jesus dies. The sky is dark for three hours and the huge veil in the temple is torn in two. The darkness may signify the power of darkness that is gathered against Jesus. He had said to those who came to arrest him, "This is your hour—when darkness reigns" (22:53). Though the power of darkness is terrible, it does not cancel out the presence of God. The death and resurrection of Jesus scatter the

power of darkness. Also, the darkness may point to the tragic days ahead for a land that rejected God's Messiah. And it may be that nature itself participates in this event. "If stones cry out when disciples are silent (19:40), why would not the sky darken when the Son of God hangs dying?" (Fred Craddock, *Interpretation Commentary: Luke*).

God remains present and God shows his presence by tearing the temple curtain in two. This shows God is not contained but is on the loose. Jesus opens the way of access to God. And it's a sign of judgment on Jerusalem and the temple.

Jesus recognizes that God is still with him and with his dying breath he commits his life to God. He still trusts God and calls him "Father."

Finally, Luke reports the effects of Jesus' death on the centurion, on the gathered crowds and on Jesus' own followers. They are all "witnesses."

The centurion has unexpected insight. He sees who Jesus is and that he is truly innocent or righteous. All the people, the crowd, who had just been watching, go away mourning and expressing remorse. This prepares for their repentance and faith in the early chapters of Acts. So Luke shows us Gentile and Jewish reactions to the death of Jesus, pointing to the offer of salvation to all people.

Several people who knew Jesus stand far off and observe. At least they are witnesses of these events. And witnessing his death is necessary so they can be qualified witnesses of his resurrection.

All those who hated and mocked Jesus have faded into the background. They are replaced by the "rule of darkness" that they had joined because of their hatred of Jesus. At one level, the death of Jesus may seem to spell the triumph of darkness. But Luke has already begun to show that the rejection of Jesus by the Jewish leadership, in league with evil, does not stifle God's purpose, but leads to the mission's widening to embrace others (Joel Green, *Luke*, NICNT).

We still share in Jesus' mission. We need to bring people to the cross. We also need to take the message of the cross wherever people are.

At the cross you can find your way home in the Savior who gives mercy and forgiveness, in the royal power of grace that flows from the One who is truly King and who reigns even on a cross.

Stay with me a while.
Well it may seem foolish, but I'm scared.
My beloved's yelling, "Crucify!"
It's as if no one ever cared.

Soldiers mock me with their songs.
They laugh because I'm naked and I'm weak.
Well I don't know how much longer I can go on.
When every breath I take is just to weep.

And for a moment time stood still,
To listen to the King of the hill.
And all the angels just stood still
To listen to the King of the hill.

Well I could've had servants
And I could have ruled this world as their King.
And I could have had wealth beyond measure.
I could have had anything, but it wouldn't have meant anything.

Not my will but Yours be done,
I had no agenda, only Your truth.
You were so proud to call me Son,
Now Father, I commit my soul to You.

And for a moment time stood still,
To listen to the King of the hill.
And I can hear you whisper still,
Father, I'm the King of the hill.

(Eli, as recorded on
Things I Prayed For, 1998)

Will we claim Jesus as our King? Will we receive the forgiveness he offers at the cross? Will we let him bring us into God's presence now and forever?