

Jesus Died *Because* of Our Sins, Not *For* Them

From the series: The Faith *Of* Jesus: Trust in a Gracious God

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
Palm Sunday, April 4, 1993

Transcription of the spoken sermon

Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey... Zechariah 9:9-10

... he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' tell him, 'The Lord needs it.'" Luke 19:28-48

We have entered again into Holy Week. We come to that moment, that flash point, to that time when all of that that was in ferment in the life and ministry of Jesus comes to a head. This was no accidental trip to Jerusalem. Matthew, Mark and Luke have Jesus going to Jerusalem just once. John has Jesus making several trips to Jerusalem. Which is the case, we really don't know, but it doesn't really matter. The point is that *this* trip was to be a time when things would come to a head. There is pretty much a consensus about that, that this might be considered a prophetic action and a political statement. This was an intentional move on Jesus' part to gather his whole life and ministry into one and challenge the very heart of that religious establishment and tradition of which he was a part. He knew what he was about. He knew what he was doing.

It was one thing for him to have gone about the hills of Galilee proclaiming his message as a charismatic holy man and prophet, but he knew finally he would have to come to this central shrine - to this very heart of that tradition that had shaped him - all of that covenant faith down through the centuries centered here in Jerusalem in the courts of the temple. Jesus was coming now to make his point finally there, and to bring his ministry to a head, perhaps to see what God would do, or to give God an opportunity to move in vindication of the claims of this one who believed he was speaking and living in the flow and power and spirit of the power of God.

Jesus came to Jerusalem. In these Lenten weeks we have been making the point that he died the way he died because he lived the way he lived. And he lived the way he lived because he believed the way he believed. How did he believe? What did he believe? What was the faith of Jesus? That is the question we've been trying to get at. We have noted some of the aspects of that faith and conviction.

That God would build *all* into a community. That there was no exclusiveness, but rather the *inclusive* love of God. That God never abandons or lets go. That God is near and full of grace. And in his table of fellowship, Jesus mediated the very presence of God.

In doing that, he got into serious trouble. Those things seemed so positive and so good, who could object to them? Wouldn't everyone agree? Was not that which Jesus believed something like the American flag, and apple pie? Wouldn't *everybody* affirm those things: the nearness of God? The grace of God? The inclusive care of God? The fact that God won't abandon? That God's presence is available to all? Who would object to those things? Well, I'll tell you who would object to those things. It was all of those guardians of society. For what Jesus did was to destabilize the order of his day, the social order of his day, the temple order of his day, the ecclesiastical order of his day, the political world, and the social world. Jesus was a destabilizer. Jesus undercut the conventional wisdom. Jesus challenged the things that everybody knew and everybody understood, and those ways and structures and forms by which everybody organized their lives.

We all have conventional wisdom by which we live. That enables us to live without thinking every time we take a step or make a move. There are some things which we simply know. There are some things we simply take for granted. It's like looking at the world through glasses. When I look at you through my glasses I see you out there. I don't think about these glasses, these spectacles. I see through them, and seeing through them I see what is out there. I see what is true. I see what is real. However, of course, these are reading glasses so they don't work. I can't see you at all. (Laughter) But, normally, spectacles give us a certain shape and form of things. We very seldom question the spectacles. I always know when I start singing more wrong words than right words that it is time for me to see John Leenhouts and check the spectacles, but that's a very specific case.

Most of the time, in the living of our lives, we don't question our presuppositions, our biases, the dominant conventional wisdom of the day. We don't do that. "My mind is made up, don't bother me with the facts!" We get into certain well-worn ruts that are comfortable, that are like an old pair of shoes. Then you don't have to think. You know about certain kinds of people, and you know about certain nations, and you know about certain colors, and you know about certain behaviors. There are things that you just plain know. You don't have to go through that whole process of thinking again. Do you? But then some human experience comes along and challenges what we thought was all settled. Of course, most of us are able to crush that down. Sometimes it requires our anger to do that, however. We hope it will make it go away so that we don't really have to go through the whole process of reorientation to a new understanding of reality.

Dear friends, that's why Jesus died. He called people up short. Good and decent folks like us. He destabilized the way one gets up in the morning and shaves and showers, and goes off to work. He called in question all of that that makes life

able to be negotiated without too much stress, too much thinking. That's why he died. Because in his prophetic call, living in the flow of God's spirit, giving voice to his vision, he challenged the conventional wisdom, the social, political, ecclesiastical relationships and structures of his time. When he came to Jerusalem, he was bringing all that to a head.

So as Luke tells us the story, he sets it in the context of a prophecy from Zechariah. In the ninth chapter of Zechariah, the first eight verses are kind of an oracle about God coming to deliver his people. Probably this prophecy was written in the fourth century B.C. when maybe Alexander the Great's great army was moving south along the Mediterranean. Maybe the prophet even saw the legions of Alexander the Great moving toward Egypt, where he would subdue that empire. You see, the ancient world was a world also of shifting power arrangements.

In Israel's history there first was Israel, and then it split into the Northern Kingdom, and the Southern Kingdom, called Judah. Then the Assyrian Empire moved in and took over the Northern Kingdom. Some 400 years later the Babylonians overcame the Assyrians, and eventually they came and they carried the people of Judah into exile. Then the Persians overcame the Babylonians and let the Jews go back to Jerusalem. Eventually, Alexander the Great and the Greeks move across the landscape. Then, finally, there were the Romans who were in power when Jesus was there.

With all of the stresses and strains, and the juggling for power at such a time, a prophet saw the armies move by and he envisioned God embracing and encompassing God's house. He thought perhaps this incredible shifting of powers and empires would be a propitious time for God's anointed one to come – that one who would be anointed with the Spirit of God and would bring justice and peace.

Israel was always looking for that servant of the Lord, that one who would be full of the power of the Spirit of God, who would be able to mediate justice and bring Shalom. That messianic vision always beckoned them. They looked for a day when God would rule over all. When God's justice would prevail. When there would be peace on earth. When the lion and the lamb would lie down together, and the wolf would graze. Ah! The vision! The vision of the one who comes as a peaceable king. He comes riding on a donkey. On a colt. Not a war-horse. Not a mighty charger. He comes and he brings the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom together. He removes the enmity. He heals the wounds of the divided Israel and he speaks peace to the nations. This is the picture that Luke gives us from the prophet Zechariah - the context in which we see Jesus coming to Jerusalem.

You see Jesus on the crest of the Mount of Olives about to approach the city, riding on a donkey. Looking at Jerusalem, he weeps. Can't you feel those hot salty tears, the pathos of his life? Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, if only you knew the

things that make for peace, but now they are hid from your eyes. And there will be this terrible devastation. This terrible destruction. Violence. Atrocity. Because, Jerusalem, you knew not the time of your visitation. Jesus believed to his dying moment that the eternal God was visiting Israel in him. That he was the mediated presence of God, the God whose presence is really an unbrokered presence in the world. Jesus said, "Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem." And we know that within forty years it happened that way. The walls were torn down, the temple burned, the people slaughtered and massacred. Jesus weeps. He weeps for Jerusalem. He weeps for the folly of the human way that seems again and again and again to invite such awful devastation, such violence and death. And so he comes with tears knowing he will probably die.

And he does die. He dies *because of* the sin of the world, not *for* the sin of the world as though, somehow or other, God was waiting to pour out God's grace and speak God's word of forgiveness through some sacrificial death. I know it says that here. I understand that. But that, in all honesty, doesn't really connect with my world and what I see going on in the world, which seems to be such a duplicate of what was going on in Jesus' day. I know the biblical writers are using Old Testament imagery, simile and metaphor. But they were on the other side of Easter looking back at that death. They were looking back at the cross and trying to figure out what in the world was going on. Why did he die? What did it mean that he died? Why did he have to die? What was the significance of that death? This was necessary. It was an attempt to understand in retrospect. It was an action of interpretation, of translation that goes on and will always go on. And St. Paul gave us the imagery of payment and atonement.

But the Gospel writers were trying to tell us by telling us of the life of Jesus, and the events of Jesus, and the teachings of Jesus. Over these weeks, and even in Lenten series over the last few years, we have seen that the Gospel writers were showing us that the way he lived caused him to die. As I think about that, it seems to me that what he taught was not that God's great problem was that God could not forgive. The Psalmist believed in God's forgiveness. "Oh Lord, if thou should'st mark iniquity, who could stand?" But there is forgiveness with God. Forgiveness. Grace. It's all in the Old Testament.

Jesus believed in a God who forgives. The problem was not that God could not forgive. The problem was that God cannot get through. The problem was not that God would love to take away my sins and give me a personal relationship and a passport to heaven, but rather the problem is that God cannot change me! God cannot get through to me! Somehow or other there is no transformation here! I go on and I repeat again and again, and all of my brothers and sisters in history repeat again and again the same kind of foolish obstinate death and destruction - over and over and over again! Jesus says, "If only you knew."

I suppose that it's because of the World Trade Center bombing, but in the *New York Times* in the last two months there has been so much about the Middle East

and the Muslim Fundamentalist Movement. I am sure you have been reading about it in whatever you read. Egypt, particularly, where the Muslim Brotherhood has rejected violence but has spawned into other groups because there are groups that absolutely insist on blowing up the world in order to make their point. The problem with the Muslim Fundamentalists is that, not only are they against Israel and against the United States for being with Israel, but they are against their own secular Arab leaders. And what they want to return their nation and their culture to is a religious state, so that their own leaders also need to go, so they have really nothing to lose. There is this worldwide conspiracy.

An article a couple of days ago relates how they are pouncing on the ancient Christian church in Egypt, the Coptic Christians. The interconnections with the World Trade Center bombing means that this terrorism is being exported and the battles will be fought anywhere in the world because our world is interconnected. The point of the article is that a professor from some Florida university says that we will have a serious problem for a long time to come, and it's not certain what can be done about it because our world presents so many opportunities for this kind of guerilla terrorism. There is now a group of people, militant of mind, absolutely dedicated, willing to die, full of purpose, full of fire, who are determined to effect this revolution in our world, take it one generation or ten generations. I was interested to read the last paragraph of a guest editorial, which had a huge drawing at the bottom with a sign like a road sign that gives warning of men working. But this one man had a bundle of dynamite and the fuse was lighted, and on one side was Egypt with a sphinx and a pyramid, and everything all in devastation. Then over here was the World Trade Center and all was devastation. Everything - civilization devastated.

You see, as long as we had east and west, U.S. - U.S.S.R. we had this focus on the super powers and the super powers sort of helped everything like this. But now we live in a world where there is eruption all over the place. What's going on? People who are angry. People who have nothing to lose. People who will say, "Burn, baby, burn." This professor from a Florida university says that the Muslim rulers themselves are going to have to put down those fanatical groups, and perhaps brutally. I read it and I say, "That's true. That's true." How can you have a world where you can have that kind of stuff going on?

You have to put it down with force, don't you? But what happens when you put it down with force? All you do is cause it to come out in another place. It seems to arise in another more militant form, another more deadly form. Do you ever deal with those ancient blood feuds, those great, great angers and hostilities between people? Do you ever really solve the problem that way? Of course not!! That's the story of history.

Jesus, 2000 years ago, saying "Jerusalem, Jerusalem." Was not his point that there is only one way to deal with that which is so endemic to the human situation that spews violence and spawns response in violence? That is the way of

sacrificial love. Turning the other cheek. Loving the enemy. Embracing the one who despitely uses me. Of course, you can't run a world that way.

But my point is, you see, God's problem is not that God cannot forgive me. God's problem is that God doesn't seem to be able to *change* me. Jesus didn't die so that I could have the sentence removed and I could have a passport to heaven. I mean, wouldn't that be wonderful. I could say, "Yes I believe. I'll take that ticket. Thank you very much," and remain unchanged. I couldn't, of course. But that, as a matter of fact, is what has happened.

We have this neat theological system of Christian doctrine where we have a problem, our sin; a solution, Jesus' death. Sin removed. Guilt removed. Openness to God. All of that stuff and the world continues to be on the brink of exploding because in the human heart there is never any significant transformation. Not in my heart. And not in the hearts of Muslim fanatics, and Jewish Orthodox, and Christian Fundamentalists. The problem is not that God can't forgive my sin. The problem is God can't break through to me. I put my glasses on. Got it made up. Figured out. Don't make me change. But, don't you see, the word *repentance* comes from the Greek word *metanoia*, which means to change one's thinking. The problem with the world is not that God can't forgive the world of sin. The problem is that the world's thinking will not change. And we egg each other on, and we escalate the violence, and we raise the stakes and nothing changes!

Well, let me give you an image to close. Let's imagine on the wall a beautiful Oriental rug. Since we are talking about things Middle East, let's roll it up. Now it's just a big roll up there. Now it's like a movie screen. Let's pull it down a little bit. You see it coming down a bit? You can begin to see the pattern? Now, of course, when it's rolled up there it is complete. It is all woven. The design is done. We can pull it down as fast or as slowly as we want to, but when we get it all the way unrolled it will be a completed, finished product, but as it was already when it was rolled up, and that unrolling becomes a revelation. An unveiling. An unrolling of what is. That's an old conception of God, of history, of creation. That's the way former generations and former centuries used to think about God the King, omnipotent, in control, knowing the end from the beginning, controlling all things.

But let me suggest another image which I think fits more with what we understand about the human person, about human willing and decision making, about the forces that are operative in history. Let's image a huge loom on which there is a tapestry being woven. God is significantly involved in that weaving process, but we get involved as well. Punching in our threads. God moving and accommodating according to the threads we put in. You see, when you are operating on a loom with a tapestry that is in process, it is in process. It is in the process of being created. Its design is not yet finished, nor clear. And what happens over here will be somewhat dependent upon what happens over there, and about all of the input of all of the crazy people called human beings. God

negotiating, maneuvering, operative, engaged, judging. blessing, but not pulling strings.

God let Jesus die. God let Jesus hang there. We are not puppets on a string. Jesus is the visible sign of God's presence in the void. God never letting go. Never giving up. Never abandoning. Weeping. Broken hearted, but never giving up.

You see the cross is that human NO to all that Jesus lived for! And Easter is God's far grander "I will not take 'no.'"

That's at least the way I understand it - it is what helps me know what I am called to do. That's to follow Jesus.