

## The Wondrous Cross

I Corinthians 1:18-25, Matthew 16:21-26

The poet T.S. Eliot once wrote: “O my soul, be prepared for him who knows how to ask questions.” As we go about our daily lives, we know that life is full of questions. Some questions are simply seeking information: “What are we having for dinner? How did you sleep last night?” Some can be more probing like: “Where were you last night? Why did you come home so late?” And some questions can be penetrating: “What are you living for? What are you going to make of your life?” Or maybe even more jolting like the one Jesus asks in front of his disciples: “What good will it be to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul?” And when Jesus asks the questions, it is important for us to listen. Actually counting some duplications, there are 213 questions that Jesus asks in the Gospels. That’s a lot of questions and they call for some response. And as a follower of this Jesus, we realize that often these questions are for us as well.

Today is the first Sunday in Lent and a season that calls us to pay close attention to those questions. It is a season of preparation before Easter that asks us to do some personal reflection and examination, that we would allow the Spirit of God to search our hearts and lead us to a deeper faith.

During the Lenten season we are going to be focusing on the cross of Jesus. We will examine what it meant for Jesus to go the cross and what are the implications of taking up the cross and following Jesus. Our Lenten series will be based on the beautiful hymn: When I Survey the Wondrous Cross, by Isaac Watts. Each week during Lent except for next weekend’s Laity service, we will look at a different verse of this hymn.

Isaac Watts is frequently referred to as the father of English hymnody. One of his early concerns was the deplorable state to which congregational singing had degenerated in most English-speaking churches. The singing consisted of slow, ponderous Psalms in which each line was first read by an appointed deacon and was followed by the droning of the congregation. Watts was a revolutionary producing “futuristic music” for his time. I guess of he would be like the contemporary music leader of our time. Because of this bold departure from the traditional Psalms, Isaac Watts was often considered to be a radical

## The Wondrous Cross

churchman. Watts not only rewrote the Psalms in this way, but he also wrote a number of hymns based solely on personal feelings. Such hymns were very controversial during his lifetime. Some of his hymns that in our hymnal express this connection to our personal spirituality: “O God, Our Help in Ages Past”, “Alas and Did My Savior Bleed”, “Am I a Soldier of the Cross”, “Marching to Zion”, and “Joy to the World”. And then the hymn that is our theme for this series “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” is an example of this type of hymn written by Watts. It’s the first known hymn to be written in the first person, introducing a personal religious experience rather than limiting itself to doctrine. This is how A.W. Tozer, the author of our Lenten study book The Pursuit of God describes this personal experience: “You and I are in little (our sins excepted) what God is in large. Being made in (*God’s*) image we have within us the capacity to know him.”

Listen to the words of the first verse: “When I survey the wondrous cross, on which the prince of glory died, my richest gain, I count but loss and pour contempt on all my pride.” What an amazing thing, to realize how Jesus transformed an ugly instrument of execution into what we can call the wondrous cross.

This means of torture and suffering would be lifted to a place of beauty and love because of what Jesus’ death on that cross meant for all humanity. It became the place of forgiveness and mercy. It became the means of dealing with our sin and brokenness. Truly it is a wondrous cross.

Which brings us back to the crucial question of Jesus: “What does it profit us...if we gain the whole world, but lose our souls? For the one who claims the name of Jesus there is a deeper call to let go of those things of the world that can inhibit our spirit and rediscover the value of those things which are of eternal value.

Let me read a portion of Tozer’s chapter from The Pursuit of God that addresses this very need in our lives. The chapter is entitled “The Blessedness of Possessing Nothing”: “Our Lord referred to the tyranny of things when He said to his disciples, If any one will come after me let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me, For whosoever shall save his life shall lose it, and whoever shall lose his life for my sake shall find it. Breaking this truth into

## The Wondrous Cross

fragments...it would seem that there is within each of us an enemy which we tolerate to our peril. Jesus called it...self, or we would say, the self-life. Its chief characteristic is it is possessiveness...To allow this enemy to live is in the end to lose everything. To repudiate it and give up all for Christ's sake is to lose nothing at last, but to preserve everything unto life eternal." That's the call of Jesus as we take this Lenten journey with him. We hear Jesus calling: Take up your cross, deny yourself and follow me." Just like we said last week that the witness of works is not always the easy or popular thing to do ...so it is in taking up the cross. There will be decisions that we will need to make based on our faith and not on our feelings or what the world says is right. There will be sacrifices we will need to make as we dedicate ourselves to the Lord. There will times of surrender as we let go of those things that hinder our walk with God. This call to take up the cross requires a commitment to take this road with Jesus. It is not a message that always resonates with the world around us...nor was it in the days of the apostle Paul. Here's how he describes it: "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. The Jews were demanding miraculous signs. The Gentiles were looking for great wisdom. But the power of God was revealed through the crucified Jesus." He says: "To those who are being saved, it is the power of God."

We may not always be comfortable with the cross and its message. In fact, it may sometimes make us uncomfortable. A few years ago, a priest at a North Carolina Catholic Church placed his usual array of Lenten crosses, all draped in black for Good Friday, out in front of his little church. Soon Father Ed received a call from the chamber of commerce saying: "Look, preacher. We've been getting complaints about those crosses out in your churchyard. Now inside the church, who cares? But out front, where everybody can see them, they are offensive. The retired people here don't like them, they find them depressing. And the tourists don't like them either. It is bad for business. People call down here to get happy, to have fun."

Well, the message of the cross is a powerful message...and it is a wondrous cross because of what Jesus did there...but it calls me to say...my richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride. It asks me: Is it my way...or God's way. Is it the way of the world or the way of God?

## The Wondrous Cross

You heard the Gospel reading. Peter, that most vocal disciple, looks for another way. When he hears Jesus speak about suffering and death, what does he do? He rebukes Jesus. “Lord, this can’t happen to you. Jesus turns to Peter and says: “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but on human things.” This was the way of the world. We are challenged to choose the things of God, but the world keeps pulling at us. And like Peter, we may be looking for an easier way, a journey that could bypass the cross. A gospel that does not demand my time and involvement or require me to make changes in my life. Making you would call it “Gospel-lite”

There’s a fascinating account of the opposition of the American Medical Association in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes’ claim that most cases of a certain type of fever were actually being transmitted by the doctors. These doctors who paid no attention to the need to disinfect themselves when they had been in touch with a diseased patient. The doctors themselves became the main carriers of the contagion that killed so many women in childbirth, but they refused to accept the evidence that was offered because they were too enthralled with another theory. They could only see it their way. Just like Peter, we can allow that which is of our own design, enthralled with our own theories, that which may be the ways of man, or the ways of the world, or the values of our culture to become the substitute for taking the road to the cross. We shy away from taking that road.

For the follower of Jesus Christ, the way to real peace and victory is by way of the cross. Because it is here that we find God’s grace and forgiveness and we discover the open door to our salvation.

This is God’s call for you and me this day. To survey that wondrous cross. To understand and take hold of what it meant for the Son of God to suffer and die for you and me. To heed Jesus’ words to take up that cross and follow him. “For those who want to save their life” Jesus says, “will lose it, and those who love their life for my sake will find it.” What a wonderful message for us to take in. We do not have to be bound by the trappings of this world. The lure and pull of worldly possessions, The burdens of worry and guilt. The power of sin that would enslave us. We do not live by the values of hate or bigotry or selfishness

## The Wondrous Cross

that so often make up our world. When we come to the cross, we can put to death the things of this world. And when those temptations, and worries, and worldly concerns surface, we can bring them to the cross. We can say with Paul as he did to the Galatians: "I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me." It is a life transformed by the power of God...even as the ugly cross is transformed to the wondrous cross. It is the power of God when we allow the message of the cross to bring us to a place of surrender and commitment to the Lord. We can live with a different point of view, we become people who can love as Christ loved, we build bridges, not barriers between people. We open our hearts to one another. We reach out in concern and service in this world.

As you come to the table today, remember what it meant for Jesus to make the sacrifice to set us free. Receive the cup and remember the blood shed to bring us salvation. Survey the cross, the wondrous cross and offer yourself anew to take up that cross and follow Jesus.