

Shiloh United Methodist Church

Matthew 17:1-9

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February 23, 2020

1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23

Did Jesus Have to Die?

1 Corinthians 3:10-11 Common English Bible (CEB)

¹⁰ I laid a foundation like a wise master builder according to God's grace that was given to me, but someone else is building on top of it. Each person needs to pay attention to the way they build on it. ¹¹ No one can lay any other foundation besides the one that is already laid, which is Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 3:16-23 Common English Bible (CEB)

¹⁶ Don't you know that you are God's temple and God's Spirit lives in you? ¹⁷ If someone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person, because God's temple is holy, which is what you are.

¹⁸ Don't fool yourself. If some of you think they are worldly-wise, then they should become foolish so that they can become wise. ¹⁹ This world's wisdom is foolishness to God. As it's written, *He catches the wise in their cleverness.* ²⁰ And also, *The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are silly.* ²¹ So then, no one should brag about human beings. Everything belongs to you— ²² Paul, Apollos, Cephas, the world, life, death, things in the present, things in the future—everything belongs to you, ²³ but you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.

Matthew 17:1-9 Common English Bible (CEB)

¹⁷ Six days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, and brought them to the top of a very high mountain. ² He was transformed in front of them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as light.

³ Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Jesus. ⁴ Peter reacted to all of this by saying to Jesus, "Lord, it's good that we're here. If you

want, I'll make three shrines: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

⁵ While he was still speaking, look, a bright cloud overshadowed them. A voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son whom I dearly love. I am very pleased with him. Listen to him!”⁶ Hearing this, the disciples fell on their faces, filled with awe.

⁷ But Jesus came and touched them. “Get up,” he said. “Don’t be afraid.” ⁸ When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, “Don’t tell anybody about the vision until the Human One is raised from the dead.”

For this month I have been asking us all to take a look at how we read scripture. Specifically in an age of fake news

Did Jesus have to die?

“No

He didn’t

He was killed.

But we’re getting ahead of ourselves.”

Let’s start today by pondering this question:

Did you eat a meal today?

If you did I would guess it either had a plant or animal in it. At one point these things were living. So, for you to have energy and life today, something had to die. The meat, fruit or vegetable had to be cared for grown and ultimately die for you to be able to chew, swallow and digest it to produce the energy, the life you needed for today.

Your life depends on the need for something else to die.

We hear stories of heroes who die, and their stories inspire new life and ongoing acts of bravery to move ahead.

We sing this beautiful song...707 in the Red Hymnal called the Hymn of promise that talks about things ending and coming anew. Winter is a season when things die, so spring can bring things to life again.

Or take for example your body, You have around 300 million cells in your body and they are placed every minute, and the old ones have to die.

As theologian Rob Bell puts it, “Death is the engine of life. All round us, all the time. This death-and-life rhythm is built in to the fabric of creation.”¹

The truth is the understanding of death bringing forth new life is not a new idea, it is an eternally valid statement about our universe.

The writers of the Bible knew this and the disciples and early believers in Christ knew this truth. Meaning the Bible writers saw this eternally valid statement and the early believers in Christ, the disciples who saw him killed as well the early people to hear the stories understood Christ’s presence in Jesus, and began to understand his death was about new life.

Which leads us back to how I started today’s message, “Did Jesus have to die?”

One response, the response that wrecks me and lets me know God loves me more than anything I can comprehend is...he was killed.

Now this is one understanding, an understanding that drives me to know that if Christ was killed by the human systems of the world, the governments of the day. Then love, God’s kind of love is risky and dangerous, and messy and hard. It brings for me a reality that Christianity works because only when there is a death, only when Christ has died could we humans wake up to the reality that this messy love is worth it, and finding ways to live it out is worth it all. Even life itself.

¹ Bell, R. (2019). *What is the Bible?: how an ancient library of poems, letters, and stories can transform the way you think and feel about everything*. New York, NY: HarperOne, an imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers. (This first riff on life and death comes from Rob Bell’s book, page 241).

I also know another eternally valid statement...how I understand Jesus' death brings me or my community into a new eternal life, might be different from yours or people you seek inspiration for new life from.

Today is transfiguration this story we heard in Matthew about how Jesus was revealed as the Christ to 3 of his followers. 3 people who thought Jesus might be two other heroes from their faith: Moses or Elijah. Both people who gave their lives, so God's people could grow closer to God.

I want to invite us into the characters climbing the mountain with Jesus, and specifically Peter. Remember Peter's role in the story he climbs the mountain with Jesus, then has this amazing experience of seeing 3 of the great leaders of his faith surrounded by God's light, and then what does he do...he offers to build a shrine or a holy housing unit for each of them. The question this leaves me with is, "What did Peter bring up the mountain with him, that he thinks he has what he needs to build a house, not just one, but 3 houses to contain the holy?"

Imagine for a minute if you will that climb up the mountain again with Jesus and his three companions. It probably took a little longer than the one line of text takes to read. These three companions are following Jesus and now we know at least Peter must have something to think he can build 3 structures. We can guess Peter is carrying a pretty heavy pack full of his supplies. As the 3 companions follow Jesus, Peter starts to slow down on the hike. Jesus turns around and says, "You won't need those things, leave them behind." Peter is a bit annoyed, because he knows he is going need supplies to raise the tent when he gets to the top. The stuff is getting heavy though, so he asks his other two friends to help out.

Later on his friends and him are breathing heavy, and there is Jesus walking, as if on water, not having the burden of a pack behind him. Jesus says, "You are all so generous to bring those great structures, but we aren't staying overnight. Leave them behind and let's enjoy this journey to the mountain top together." The three look at each other,

shake their heads no and continue up the mountain with sweat running down their faces.

A while later Jesus looks behind him and his friends are even farther behind and now they have started to bicker, Peter blames James and John for whining and James and John blame Peter for bringing the things in the first place. They start to argue about the very nature of why they even need to get to the top, who deserves to get there, and who should stay back to guard the supplies they are carrying. Jesus says, “The mountain top is the goal, you can leave those burdens behind.”

As the party crested the top of the mountain there was an amazing view and sun appeared behind Jesus and two other figures appeared. Peter poked his friend and said, “See now I can use my gear to build a tent for each of them.” When suddenly a wind came up and scattered all of the supplies and knocked the three men to their knees. When the three looked up, Jesus was standing there saying, “Incredible isn’t it, those that haven’t seen this beautiful view and had their burdens removed, won’t understand until they see it themselves.”

I remember vividly the moment when I heard the Good News from a dear friend and colleague in ministry. It was a plain church room, with folding tables and some chairs, a Sunday school room. I had spent 4 months writing 50 pages or so of theological reflections. In the process I had to explain my understanding for atonement or my understanding of Christ’s life, death on the cross and resurrection. Atonement is how we understand how Christ removed the things that separate us from God, and continues to connect us to God’s love through the power of the Holy Spirit.

In that plain looking Sunday school room my friend said, “Your answer is great Tyler, but is it the right answer?”

I am sure I tried to come up with some explanation of why it was right. After working on my papers for that many months, you start believing

you are always right. As I broke into my explanation of how I understood my answer she stopped me and said, “But it might not work for the man who has faced...”

I actually don't remember the specific example, but what I do remember is that she helped me understand that different understandings of Christ are needed by different people, and different communities at different times.

A worksheet created from this blogpost was shared with everyone in worship:

<http://hackingchristianity.net/2013/03/primer-on-atonement-theories.html>

“The word atonement comes from sixteenth-century English and literally means at-one-ment. Atonement is the process of reconciliation between God and human beings (either on a communal or individual basis) with the goal of righting a wrong or injury, i.e. sin. Christians contend that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is intimately related to this process. But not all agree on *when* this act of atonement happened.

So in your mind, what part of Jesus' life *was most important* in redeeming humanity?

1. God becoming human in the Incarnation (Christ's birth)
2. Jesus teaching us and performing miracles (Life and Teaching)
3. Jesus dying on the cross (Crucifixion)
4. Jesus rising from the dead (Resurrection)”²

² <http://hackingchristianity.net/2013/03/primer-on-atonement-theories.html>

(For this section I took excerpts from the following citation and told stories of 4 different Atonement understandings. Please grab this book and look at pages 141-150 or listen to the sermon online. Inbody, T. L. (2002). *The many faces of christology*. Nashville (Tenn.): Abingdon Press.)

Each of these understandings matter and carry valid statements of faith. Because as we learn from Paul we are all a part of the body of Christ. We all carry a truth of what Christ does for us that is not perfected in human knowledge, but in the knowledge of Christ. It takes the ear's understanding as well as the big toe's understanding to get the full picture of Christ.

A paraphrase of one of my favorite pastors put it, "In Jesus there is a reality of chosen powerlessness. A moment in which God said, 'I would rather die than be in the sin accounting business anymore.' And in that moment when Jesus reached the end of his life and made an eternally valid statement of 'forgive them for they know not what they do.' In this moment I am brought to the foot of the cross to see Christ."

As I said earlier, the knowledge of Christ's life, death and resurrection wrecks me. It brings me to my knees because I know in my heart that God used this life, death and resurrection to reveal to me and to others that God's love is cosmic and beyond my comprehension. As the Psalmist in Psalm 139 writes that nothing in life or in death, nor the farthest I could run could separate me from God's love.

As I learned, like Peter did on the Mountaintop, it will not be my best explanations who explain what Christ is for me, it will be when I allow myself to see Christ face to face that I will really know what God has done for me. All I can do for now is be an agent of the Good News that

God loved the world so much, that Christ lived and died, so that I might know eternal life in God's Holy Spirit was possible.