

Today we can still ask the question “How can this man who was rejected, tortured, and killed be the messiah, how can this man who was rejected, tortured and killed save us?”

In Matthew’s gospel we felt Jesus’ pain, we watched his torment, we heard him cry out his feeling of abandonment, and we watched the world reject him.

In John’s gospel Jesus carries his own cross, engages in a verbal sparring match with Pilate, creates a new family assigning his mother to the disciple he loved and vice versa while nailed to the cross, says that he is thirsty to fulfill the scripture, and then announces that it is finished and gives up his spirit. He has remained in control of this whole process. This is his moment of triumph, his glory.

Nevertheless if we step back for a moment from John’s perspective, Jesus died a horrible death, he was abandoned by his friends, and he was rejected by the world. If we let ourselves absorb the horror of what had transpired, if we enter into the feelings of his disciples, who even though they failed him at the last moment had loved him, if we watch through the eyes of the women who stayed and the disciple he loved we can feel their grief, their anguish, and the wrenching question of why? Why did Jesus have to die?

Here was a man who brought healing, who preached forgiveness, who offered an intimate relationship with God and he was killed. The world wanted none of it.

We come to this point every year during Holy Week and it pierces our hearts as well. But it’s different for us because we know that the resurrection is coming but still our salvation is wrought through the death of an innocent man, the Son of God.

Christians have asked the question of why and the church has come up with many different answers over the years. None of which are sufficient to explain this great and terrible mystery.

We know that Jesus came to repair our relationship with God which has been broken by sin going all the way back to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. These approaches to understand why Jesus had to die are called the Theories of the Atonement and if you look at the word atonement and break it down into its parts it looks like at-one-ment. Jesus came to make us whole, to make us one with God, again. On a very, very simplistic level there are three basic theories.

The oldest theory is called “Ransom and Victory”. It holds that life is a constant struggle between good and evil, God and the devil. Because of sin the devil has a piece of us preventing us from returning to God when we die. Because God still loves us in spite of our sin Jesus became human and when he is killed Jesus doesn’t stay dead and breaks the power of the devil

(and death) when he is raised. In the cross marked on our foreheads in baptism we are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever. Since we are joined to him in baptism we share in his triumph over the devil.

The second theory is the "Satisfaction or Substitution" theory. It says that our sin has ruptured our relationship with God so badly that we cannot make it up. God cannot forgive us this debt because God's justice demands that it be paid. The only way it can be paid is by obedience unto death. In a sense we owe God and only a God can make it up. Nevertheless God still loves us so Jesus becomes human. Jesus' sacrificial death is a substitute payment that satisfies the debt. The cross becomes the sign of God's forgiveness.

In the third theory of "Moral Influence" love is at the forefront. We have not loved God and each other as God had hoped. Our inability to love keeps us from eternal life with God. God becomes incarnate to model for us that love and Jesus' invitation to us is to follow him so that we might be transformed by that love. By his death on the cross Jesus loves us to the end; God's forgiveness becomes available to all because of that love.

All these theories are inadequate when we are confronted with the cross. The cross is the ultimate paradox. As Paul says "...the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (1 Cor 1:18) It is ironic that in this the holiest week of the year when we expect to be celebrating the resurrection and the glory of Spring we expect the pandemic to peak. On this Good Friday in a time when our lives have been upended and we know not when normalcy will return or even what a new normal will look like, the cross grounds us. The cross grounds us in what is important, that no matter what God loves us, that God was willing to die for us. Whatever the ultimate reason for Jesus' death he knew it was going to happen; and he went to his death willingly. Jesus was not God's victim; Jesus chose to do the work of his Father.

In John's gospel Jesus alludes to his death/glorification multiple times (Chapters 12-17). When the soldiers come for him the announcement of his identity knocks them flat proving that Jesus could have escaped had he wished. When Peter tries to defend him Jesus says "Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?" (18:11) Jesus accepts the need for what comes next, trusting in God's plan, obedient to God. Jesus gave himself up to the hands of the soldiers; Jesus gave himself up to mistreatment by the religious authorities. He gave himself into the hands of Pilate and did not resist his torture by the soldiers. In front of Pilate he will say "You would have no power over me unless it were given to you from above." (19:11a)

Jesus' triumph, his glorification is his willingness to be vulnerable, not to transcend his suffering, but to remain obedient to his Father. Jesus' death will make resurrection possible; it will open for us a new life, eternal life with an intimate relationship with God.

*Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your Name.*

*Amen.*