

Don't Flinch

Isaiah 52:13-53:12, Psalm 22:1-18, John 18-19

Taking the Bypass to Easter

I think spring has finally wrestled winter to the ground... Over the years I've marveled at Claire's ability to create beauty in our yard. I'm happy to mow the grass and let her work out the flower beds. She patiently studies, designs, shops for healthy plants, and cultivates the soil. And it pays off with gorgeous colors.

It is so human to want to reach a goal, like beauty, without sacrifice.

I wanted to be able to instinctively play guitar solos without practicing an hour a day.

I wanted great biceps and abs without working out.

I wanted a peace of mind without spending daily time in prayer and scripture.

People have figured out shortcuts to their goals: things like steroids, porn, marijuana, and self-help gurus. But while the shortcuts seem to achieve the desired end, they tend to leave the soul longing.

And, so, let's be honest: it's so tempting to bypass Good Friday on the way to Easter.

We would love to just celebrate Jesus's Resurrection - not to mention there's chocolate, and beer exchanges.

Even Jesus himself was tempted to take the easy way out: First at the beginning of his ministry in the wilderness when the devil told him he could rule nations if Jesus would bow down to him. Then the night before the Crucifixion when the Son asked his Father if there was any other way. I find it interesting that both times Scripture says an angel came to strengthen him to do his Father's will (Matthew 4:11, Luke 22:43).

The consequences of taking a shortcut in this case would have been catastrophic not just for Jesus, but for the entire human race. There was only one way. Jesus had to face the Cross head on.

But his so-called disciples couldn't bear to face it. They had been so bold just weeks before, but now all but John scattered, at least one outright denied him, another betrayed him.

"This is NOT the way it's supposed to happen! No way the Messiah King of the Jews dies on a bloody cross like a common criminal!"

We flinch. We want to clean up the cross, dip it in gold, add some filigree, and make it into fashion jewelry.

If I'm honest, I have to admit there's in me a little of what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:22-25: *Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.*

Deep down, how many of us really wish Jesus HAD called down those angels and ripped the nails off the Cross in glorious vengeance? A real Captain America savior. That would have been the kind of warrior king Paul says the Jews were looking for.

On the other hand, how many of us had to be dragged kicking and screaming to watch *The Passion of the Christ*? “It’s too violent, too bloody - I just can’t take it.”

We can’t bear to look at him, so we settle our minds into a sanitized, stained glass crucifixion - a superhuman, stoic Jesus who barely bled and calmly carried on with his wise sayings from the cross. That would have been the kind of philosopher Paul says the Greeks would respect.

The Cross: The Crux of History

But the TRUTH of history is that Jesus of Nazareth fully felt the pain, physically and spiritually, and stayed up there for you and me. He took every whip, thorn, and nail for you and me. He hung naked taking insults until he died. For you and me.

As we heard in the amazing prophecies from Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53, written hundreds of years before the event they described: the Cross is the crux of history.

Easter completes the victory, but the Resurrection by its very nature won’t let us hide the Cross. There is no Risen Christ without a Dead Jesus. Crucifixion and Resurrection are nailed together for eternity.

The bloody, humiliating execution of Jesus IS EXACTLY how God planned all along to defeat Sin and Evil.

I can remember at age 18 still struggling to understand HOW the cross was related to my salvation, so I’m not going to assume everyone here does.

The Cross begins with our sin. Every person’s selfishness and rebellion against God deserves death as just punishment. God’s justice doesn’t allow him to simply overlook our sin, but in his love for human beings he deeply desires to save us.

His solution, as Isaiah 53 so vividly shows, was to provide a human substitute who would be “pierced for OUR transgressions and crushed for OUR iniquities” so that “the punishment that brought US peace” would be “on HIM, and by HIS wounds” WE would be “healed.” The problem is that if this had been JUST a human being, it would have been cruel and pagan-like for God to lay all that punishment on one faithful person. Little different from tossing a virgin into a volcano.

But it would turn from cruelty to loving sacrifice if God could somehow BE this substitute HIMSELF. And this is part of why the Trinity is so important. Because God is three in one, he could be BOTH the sender and the one sent to die for our sins. And that is exactly what God did. This is grace, completely undeserved.

Most of us encounter folks in our own lives, even family and friends, who think we’re a fool. But we have to own it - no embarrassment, no hiding. Because we know that “foolishness” is actually power and wisdom. It is the only power that can save us.

April 16: Our Crucified Lord Identifies with Tragedy

The anniversary of the Virginia Tech shooting falls on Easter this year: 10 years ago Sunday *a man walked into a dormitory and brutally killed two students. Only hours later, this same man chained the doors to an academic hall, and killed 30 more before taking his own life.* Those of us with faith in Christ recognize the Kingdom of God has come in part through Christ: we are given new life with the power of the Holy Spirit and are no longer slaves to sin. But until Christ

returns to put an end to ALL Evil, April 16 is a painful reminder that even the most faithful followers of Jesus suffer in the brokenness of this world with everyone else.

As Austin Knies and I were talking and praying this week, he mentioned that he had written a reflection on his experience as a student that day. He graciously agreed to allow me to share it with you this evening:

I was standing outside this hall as it happened, hearing the shots fired just before a SWAT van pulled up and yelled to run.

That day four people... that I either knew personally or by association were counted among the dead. It wasn't merely sadness, fear, or anger that I felt. I felt rage. It was the only time in my life where if the shooter were still alive and the chance arose, I would have taken his life without giving it a second thought, as easy as waking up in the morning.

Back then, my rage was directed towards a single man, but like most things, time and experience bring new context and new interpretation to past events. Over time I was able to forgive the shooter, and my rage is now directed to the real evil behind the tragedy.

It is Satan himself who has infected the world, allowed in by mankind, and as a result not only man, but all of creation is broken and in need of redemption. The shootings at Virginia Tech are my reminder of the healing that creation needs...

All of creation is saved so that we will live in it free from agony and death, and free from tragedy.

A good God sent his son, and the Son was willing.

In the tragedies of this world, the Crucifixion provides one more message: GOD submitted himself in human frailty to all the cruelty and pain the world could dish out. Remember that after the Resurrection, Jesus still had the nail marks in his hands to show Thomas - this is a sure sign that he continues to identify with every tragedy human beings endure. He promised he would never leave us, so in every heartbreak, Jesus walks with us, absorbing both the sin and the pain, giving us grace to continue in faith and hope.

Stand at the Foot of the Cross

Since Jesus gave everything for us, the least we can do is honor him by standing squarely before the Cross and facing it head on.

So tonight, stand at the foot of the Cross. Let the blood from Jesus' pierced feet drip on your head. Smell Jesus' stench. Hear his gasps as he tries to lift himself up to breathe. Realize that he COULD have called down the angels the mockers challenged him to, but he is staying there in excruciating humiliation as a substitute for what you and I personally deserve.

If you are not living as a follower of Jesus, I plead with you to pray to him tonight, asking for the forgiveness that comes from the Cross. Then come back here on Sunday morning with your brothers and sisters to celebrate his victory over death.

And what should you take home?

Let the next 36 hours be reflective, don't rush to Easter. On Friday and Saturday Jesus was defeating Evil as no one else could, he was in the grave so we wouldn't have to stay in ours, and he was modeling the sacrificial way to wage war in the Kingdom of God.

As Paul urged in Philippians 2, when we look full on at Christ's example, we can't help but be changed: "in humility valuing others above ourselves, not looking to our own interests but to the interests of others."

Tonight and tomorrow, imitate his character by taking no short cuts: spend time with God and his Word, humbly serve your spouse, take time to patiently listen to your kids and friends. But we can also, as Jesus did - even on the cross - forgive our enemies. And, finally, it is OK to imitate him in the way they said revealed how deeply he loved his dead friend: Jesus wept.

In Christ, It.Is.Finished.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.