

Against The Grain

April 2, 2023 A.M.
West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
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Scripture Reading

“Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My father will honor the one who serves me” (John 12:24-26).

FIGHTING AGAINST DEATH

Anyone with a television, cell phone, or newspaper has been talking about the events of this past week. Stories of death and destruction. Stories that feel too close to home.

They didn’t have televisions in the ancient world. But there were stories about real life events that everybody talked about. When Jesus’ grandparents were children, Alexander Jannaeus—the Judaeen king and high priest—rounded up 800 Pharisees who opposed him, strapped them to giant two-by-fours known as crosses, and had them crucified.¹ Don’t think that wasn’t talked about among his teachers at Temple.

65 years before his birth (like the late 1950’s are to us), Spartacus led a slave revolt against the Romans. As punishment, the Romans crucified 6,000 of them, stretched meters apart along the 100 mile road between Capua and Rome known as the Appian Way.² Surely that was in his high-school textbook.

If that wasn’t, perhaps this was. When Jesus was just 2 years old (4 B.C.), Herod the Great died, and a group of Jews revolted, claiming to follow a Messiah figure among them. The Roman general Varus swiftly took action, crucifying 2,000 of Jesus’ fellow Jews.³ And this practice continued throughout his life. Picture a teenage Jesus, walking

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/crucifixion-capital-punishment>

² Appian, *The Civil Wars*, 1.120.

[https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Appian/Civil Wars/1*.html#120](https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Appian/Civil%20Wars/1*.html#120)

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Publius_Quintilius_Varus#cite_note-17

the roads leading out of the city of Nazareth, looking up every few miles to see the hanging body of dying man, with armed guard standing nearby.

All of this tells me that when Jesus said “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me” (Mk 8:34), nobody would have heard that as a metaphor.

We watched with stunned horror as little children, fearing for their lives, huddled in the corner, or under their desks, or ran for cover. I’m old enough to remember Columbine. And there have been others since then. So many others. And maybe because this time it was 2 miles from Lipscomb Academy (a school some of you might have family attending). Maybe because I served for 3 years as the head of a school very much like this, talking with parents about their fears along this line. Maybe because I work directly below the sounds of happy feet running up and down the hallways every day, and I work with the head of a school that meets right here in our building. Or maybe it’s because I am a preacher with a daughter. Whatever the reason, this one feels too close to home.

That news came on the heels of a deadly tornado that ripped through Mississippi and Alabama, taking at least 25 lives and robbing many more of house and home. We saw pictures of people we know sitting on crates on what used to be their front porch. And we thought of ways to help them recover, to get back what they lost. To rebuild their lives again.

Then, just 36 hours ago, many of us huddled in shelters and basements, our eyes glued to the weather channel, as we watched a tornado touch down less than 50 miles from here, ripping up shopping centers in North Little Rock, and causing a school over in Wynn to implode. The deadly storm left 2 precious souls dead in Wynne, and others trapped below the debris.

It scared us. All these stories scare us. Some seems so out of our control; some seems perhaps within our control, though we don’t agree on how exactly to fix it. It’s natural to look for a cause that we can fight or defend. It’s humane to look for ways to protect innocent lives. It is normal to ask how can we help others recover from damages. This is all because it’s natural to assume “what if next time, it’s me?”

We fear death. We don’t want to die. We want to live. And we want to join some group that spends its time ensuring that others will live. I pray to God that we, as a nation, as one human race, will find ways to reduce violence, to live at peace with one another, to protect the vulnerable, to have a society where children don’t fear for their lives. The ancient world treated children with contempt, leaving those undesired out in the cold

to die of starvation. The early Christians were known for taking unwanted children and calling them “wanted,” bringing them into their homes, raising them as their very own. We are a people who believe in life. Throughout Christian history, there are untold numbers of stories of God’s people banding together or acting in their own to stand between an attacker and a victim, to exchange their life so that others may live. Oh yes. We are a people who believe in life. I pray that by our words and our actions we will be known by the world around us as “those people who will do everything they can to save lives.”

PREPARING TO DIE

But today is also what, for centuries, believers down through the years have called Palm Sunday—the final week in the early life of Jesus of Nazareth, who taught a small band of loyal disciples a way of life that doesn’t make a lot of common sense. He taught that the best way to ensure that others enjoy life is to prepare each and every day to give up our own.

For the church that is gathered this morning, the called out people of God, those who have agreed to be baptized with the baptism of suffering which Christ himself was baptized with, our text this morning is not an easy one.

“Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My father will honor the one who serves me” (John 12:24-26).

The Lord Jesus Christ calls you and me to a surprising goal. We are called to join a group that spends its time preparing each other to die.

It’s a fact of life that whether you join a movement and die for a cause or choose a life entirely devoted to yourself, we all will have our rendezvous with death. What will get us in the end is not known. We will die *from* something. But there is another astonishing truth: we all die *for* something.

“The biggest difference between the church of today and the early church,” writes Sam Wells, “isn’t the spread of the gospel around the world, or the proliferation of other faiths, making Christianity one option among many, or...even the astronomy that tells us we’re a tiny planet in a colossal universe. The biggest difference is that in the first

century, to be a Christian was to risk your life by proclaiming a truth contrary to the prevailing wisdom that said our lord and master is the Roman Emperor.”⁴

Can you see the early church? No, they aren't there in a comfortable building at noon in the center of town, under a steeple that stretches clear into the sky. There they are...early in the morning, huddled in the corner of a cave on the outskirts of the city, surrounded by rocks, dirt, belting out the praises of Christ in total darkness. Walk between them, and I'll tell you what you won't find. You won't find many nobles among them. You probably won't find enough money all taken together to warrant a thief to waste his time. You won't find armed guards at the door. And you won't find fear of death. For this is why they came in the first place. These are sowers...sowers for the Lord. And the seed...is themselves.

For nearly 300 years, Christianity was functionally illegal in the Roman Empire. All the coins declared Caesar “Lord”, “Son of God,” and “Savior of the world.” Because of the cult of Caesar worship, or just the cruel and varying whims of local rulers, Christians faced various levels of persecution, including arrest, torture, and even execution. That is until an epic showdown in the year 312 when Constantine the Great defeated his usurper brother-in-law Maxentius at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. The following February, in the year 313, Constantine (who controlled the Western Roman Empire) and Emperor Licinius who controlled the Balkans met in what is now Milan and signed an agreement to permanently establish the religious toleration of Christians throughout the Roman Empire, including the freedom to confess their faith and worship whatever deity they wish. He also banned the practice of crucifixion.

In the Roman-owned colony of Philippi, the first public Christian assembly hall was erected, and dedicated to the memory of the Apostle Paul. Now, we have found earlier places of worship during those clandestine times of persecution (such as Roman catacombs, or even the house church at Dura-Eurapos in Syria). But this is the earliest known public Christian church building with open doors that can be dated with any certainty.

Archaeologists have uncovered several rooms in this church, including a baptistry connected to an underground water tunnel. And here is where the story gets fascinating. Next to the baptistry was a little room where instruction was offered to those preparing for their baptism (catechumens). This room sat on top of an old cemetery. Archaeologists believe that in this cemetery contain the bones of the earliest Christian martyrs. Do you know what that means? The water that filled the baptistry gushed forth

⁴ Sam Wells, “Unless A Grain of Wheat.” A sermon preached at St Martin-in-the-Fields (21 Mar 2021). <https://www.stmartin-in-the-fields.org/unless-a-grain-of-wheat/>

from the martyr's tomb! Can you picture the scene? In the very place where, earlier, Roman guards would march up and down the street looking for anyone who would dare to defy Caesar worship to place them in shackles and lead them to a cross, new believers would read Paul's letter to the Philippians, get to the crescendo of that beautiful song in chapter 2, rise to sing from the top of their lungs that "Jesus is Lord" and Caesar isn't, and be plunged into the water gushing forth from the bones of the martyrs that they, in their baptism, declared themselves to be joining.⁵

THE WHEAT FIELD

Picture again that wheat in the field. Can you see it there, swaying in the wind? That's most people. Living our lives where we are planted. Some, without a care in the world, enjoying the feel of the breeze, soak up the sun and drink deeply of the nectar of life until the autumn of their lives when they pass into that good night. Others stand there, filled with fear, looking every which way and wondering when a terrible storm happens upon them, or the day when the reaper comes to take what belongs to them. And in both cases, if anything about lives on it will be because some gust of wind comes along and carries their seeds to other soil. That's wild wheat.

Jesus isn't talking about wild wheat. He's talking about a crop the master has already plucked. He's talking about domestic wheat—something his hearers would have understood. "A grain of wheat" means a good portion of grain that has already been through the sifter. Heads of wheat that has already been plucked, so that they could be broken up, divided up, and replanted. Stand alone in the wheat field until the end, and that's the end of the story. But it's the one died, died early, died for a reason, that find they are born again through bearing fruit for a future harvest.⁶

I want a comfortable life. I imagine you do too. We spend a lot of time thinking about how to save our lives, and save our money, so we can live and live well in a comfortable retirement. It's what everything in our culture proclaims to be the good life. But Jesus promises none of that. And in our baptism, we declared that to no longer be our expectation. It may happen; but we signed up to die.

In our homes, especially ones with children, we will be getting ready to have a wonderful surprise for them: baskets full of goodies, eggs a plenty, and everything imaginable in

⁵ Charalambos Bakirtzis, "Paul and Philippi: The Archaeological Evidence," in *Philippi at the Time of Paul and after His Death*, ed. Charalambos Bakirtzis & Helmut Koester (Harrisburgh PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), Pp. 42-46. Available here:

<https://archive.org/details/philippiatimeof0000unse/page/n5/mode/2up?view=theater>

⁶ Wes Howard-Brook, *Becoming Children of God: John's Gospel and Radical Discipleship* (Wipf and Stock, 2003), pp. 279-280, quoting Antony Gittins. Referenced in Sam Wells, "Unless A Grain of Wheat."

the shape of bunnies. I'm looking forward to that. I know Grace is looking forward to that. But let us never forget there is more to that.

“The sign of our religion,” said Patrick Mead, “is not a big bunny holding flowers. It’s a cross.” And as an animal lover and as one formerly allergic to chocolate, I’m all for bunnies and tons of chocolate. But this Sunday morning, as we reflect on the final week in the earthly life of Jesus, I want to remind you that directly behind me is a grave. And on the tables in front of me, sits cups of blood. We are in the life saving business; but not our own. When it comes to our own, we are in the life-giving business.

The story doesn’t end with death. Praise God! The story ends with resurrection! You and I, in our baptism, sought resurrection. We accepted the promise of God that like he raised the body of Jesus our Lord from the dead, as we were lifted from the watery grave of baptism we rejoiced in knowing that one day, God will raise us up from the dead. We want church to be about that. The joy of friendship, spiritual mountain highs, and deeds of service that make me feel better and make your life better. But that’s all resurrection Sunday. There can be no resurrection without death. There can be no Easter Sunday without Good Friday.

Jesus prepares his disciples to die. He says to us “*Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be.*” Then he walks boldly and intently toward the cross.

WAY OF LIFE

We are called to see the way of the cross not as a sad possible end for some of us, but as the way of life for all of us.

“To this you have been called,” writes Peter, “because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in His steps” (1 Pet 2:21). It would be thought strange for a large number of people to carry around their necks a small emblem of an electric chair; yet today many Christians continue to wear a cross. One reason is because the cross not only reminds us of one important day in the past, but a self-surrender that has come to define our way of life. One 19th century Christian theologian wrote that “Christians are asked to live, not in the shadow of the Cross, but in the fire of its creative action.”⁷ It’s the “living significance” of the death of Jesus that matters.⁸ Christians follow a self-surrendering God who chooses the way of death in

⁷ Attributed to Teilhard de Chardin.

⁸ Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, rep. 2017), Preface.

order to bring about life for the world. The same spirit that led Jesus to the cross leads us to self-denial as we take up the cross ourselves.

His is an upside-down kingdom, and it changes my value system in every way. Luke says “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (Luke 1:51-52 NRSV). Notice how the very things that drive the kingdoms of the world—money, sex, power, career, and status—are all declared to be gods of this world, and all are “exposed and defeated” in the cross. It also means that you and I are commanded by our King not to chase any of those things as a way to find relief from suffering.

Jesus died naked without a worldly possession to his name. Because of that, I can see money as something to be given away and used for the kingdom, not something to hoard and in which to find my happiness or security. Jesus died the death of a common criminal at the hands of the powerful. Because of that, I can see power as something to be used to serve others and to lift up the lowly, rather than a status symbol of superiority. He gives us literally a new way of life.

Paul concludes his powerful letter to the Galatians with these words: “may I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal 6:14 NIV).

The 4th century preacher John Chrysostom said this to his church in a Sunday sermon:

Now indeed [the cross] appears to be a reprehensible thing, but only to the world and to unbelievers. In heaven and for believers it is the highest glory. For poverty too is reprehensible, yet it is a cause of boasting to us. Many mock simplicity, but we are disciplined by it. In this way the cross ironically is also a cause of boasting for us. Paul did not say ‘I do not boast’ or ‘I do not wish to boast’ but ‘God forbid,’ as though he were deprecating something absurd and calling on the aid of God to set this right. But what is this boasting in the cross? That on my behalf Christ took the form of a slave and suffered what he suffered on account of me the slave, the enemy, the ingrate.”⁹

Born in a castle 600 years later, Bernard of Clairvaux was born into great wealth, security, and luxury. His father, Tecelin, was a knight of great bravery, and served as vassal to the Duke of Burgundy. Bernard was not only a person of noble birth, but was also very handsome, well educated, had impeccable manners, and the world, you might

⁹ Chrysostom, *Homily on Galatians* 6.14. Cited in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament, Vol 8: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*, ed. Mark J. Edwards (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1999), p. 97.

say, was his oyster. Then he heard the story of the cross. He had night visions of his mother (who had died when he was young) calling him to leave it all aside and assume the way of life that is modeled on renunciation not accumulation. So he gave it all away and became an impoverished monk. His life was so characterized by spiritual meditation on the cross, that a later poem came to be attributed to him that we still sing today:

O Sacred head, now wounded,
With grief and shame way down,
Now scornfully surrounded
With thorns thine only crown,
How art thou pale with anguish,
With sore abuse and scorn.
How does that visage languish,
Which once was bright as morn.

What Thou, my Lord, hast suffered,
Was all for sinner's gain;
Mine, mine was the transgression,
But Thine the deadly pain.
Lo, here I fall, my Savior!
'Tis I deserve Thy place;
Look on me with Thy favor,
Vouchsafe to me Thy grace.

What language shall I borrow
To thank thee, dearest friend?
For this, thy dying sorrow,
Thy pity without end.
O make me think forever,
And should I fainting be,
Lord, let me never, never
Outlive my love to thee.

Be Though my consolation,
my shield when I must die;
Remind me of Thy passion
When my last hour draws nigh.
Mind eyes shall then behold Thee,
Upon Thy cross shall dwell,
My heart by faith enfolds Thee.

Who dieth thus dies well.¹⁰

The cross shapes not only how I plan my death, but how I live my life. So we see in these stories a servant-hearted acceptance of the cross as a way of life.

It's our way of life when suffering comes our way. It's the way of life for the church in Kiev, hanging ever so loosely on to independence, reading a letter written from prison to a struggling church in an occupied Roman colony. The letter, the book of Philippians, tells them that it has been granted to them not only to believe in Christ, but to suffer for his sake. While it might feel right to answer might with might, or to hang on to the shifting promises of loyalty and support from one country or another, their true citizenship is in heaven, says Paul, and you are called to await a savior from there who will, one day, subject all nations—and all things—to himself.

The cross is the shape of our lives. “Christ draws men to fellowship with himself, alike in suffering and in the presence of God.”¹¹

RESURRECTION

The cross is also our every-day reminder that avoiding death only delays it. But choosing to lay down our lives, our ambitions, our relentless pursuit of happiness is the only way to truly keep it. To live our lives as if we owned them is a recipe doomed to failure; because life is a gift from God. We all are wheat, and it's God's field. But to lose our lives—to surrender them to the Master in service to God and others, means we will end up with lives of abundance—lived with meaning and purpose, and ending with untold fruit.¹² And that is because if we surrender now, our suffering and sacrifice can produce a harvest of righteousness, as the story of the cross is told and retold in the telling and retelling of our own lives.

Paul knows this. That's why he uses the same illustration Jesus does, not about death, but about resurrection. “What you sow,” says Paul in 1 Cor 15, “does not come to life

¹⁰ “O, Sacred Head” is taken from the Latin poem *Salve mundi salutare*. Attributed to Bernard of Clairvaux due to his spiritual life, but more probably penned by the Medieval poet Arnulf of Leuven (d. 1250). The poem was reworked into a more personal reflection and translated into German in 1656 by Paul Gerhardt. The poem received several translations and emendations that led to the final English version in our hymnals, though it is mostly James Waddel Alexander's 1830 English translation that is most widely used and known in the English-speaking world. For more, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/O_Sacred_Head,_Now_Wounded

¹¹ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary 36 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), p. 212.

¹² Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, Black's New Testament Commentary (New York: Continuum, 2005), p. 350.

unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat...But God gives it a body...The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body” (1 Cor 15:36-44 NIV).

And “when the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory’” (1 Cor 15:54 NIV).