

The Cross Staring Back At Us

Good Friday

A sermon preached by Zac Koons at St. Mark's, Austin for Good Friday, 2020

Throughout the course of the regular church year we preachers tend to speak about the cross in cosmic, relatively dispassionate, and theological terms. We talk about Jesus dying for the sins of the world. About Christ as an all-atoning sacrifice, a second Adam, our substitute and ransom, the cross as our bridge across the cosmic chasm.

Such ways of speaking about the cross never seem to quite fit on Good Friday. Because on Good Friday we stare at the cross. And in that space between our eyes and the arms of the cross, everything becomes a lot less cosmically big-picture and a lot more immediate and personal. What I mean is that today is not a day for abstract theological explanation as much as it is gazing on a mystery that is both barbarous and somehow beautiful. We are on this day confronted starkly with this peculiar ancient device of public torture, humiliation, and execution that has—in an irony beyond all other ironies—become the centerpiece of our religious life, something we follow behind in procession, something we clutch between fingers in prayer, something we use to mark the covers of our most precious books. On this day we stare at the cross, and the cross stares back at us.

On this Good Friday in particular, this deeply personal nature of our encounter with the cross feels especially poignant, because this Good Friday meets us in a fragile moment. COVID-19 may not yet have broken through the walls of your personal circle of friends and family, but it has now broken through the walls of our church community. Just yesterday we received news of two deaths of family members of parishioners, one a mother in London and another an uncle in New York. Fair to say, we are all feeling a bit more in touch with our own mortality than we did three weeks ago.

In this space of encounter with the cross, I want to hold up two moments from John's telling of the Passion that feel like they contain good words for us today. Because John's Gospel is not an epic, objective account. It is a dramatic telling by someone who was there.

The first moment is when Pilate says to Jesus, "Do you not understand that I have the power to release you and the power to crucify you?" And Jesus responds by saying, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above."

There are two factors that fuel the genius and pathos of this first moment. One is that Jesus is clearly innocent. John goes out of his way to show this. He is arrested unjustly, in the middle of the night. His trial is rigged. The crowds who called for his execution were manipulative. Even Pilate thinks he is innocent. The second factor is that Jesus does nothing to try to extricate himself from this injustice. He submits willingly to arrest. He is silent in the dock at trial. And here in this moment Pilate himself is trying to get him off the hook. "Just humor me for two seconds," he says. But Jesus refuses. "What is about to happen is not up to you. It is up to me."

The first moment amounts to this. Jesus lays down his life of his own accord. This is nothing we haven't heard before. But it resonates against our current predicament in a powerful way that you each deserve to hear today.

That Jesus willingly went to the cross provides us with this word of consolation: In our own coming closer to death, we get no further from God.

In our own coming close to death—indeed in our own death—we get no further from God.

This is what Jesus ultimately shows faith in, in deciding to willingly lay down his life. It's not that Jesus is not afraid. He is afraid. It's not that he wants to die. He does not. Remember his prayer from the Garden of Gethsemane. It is that Jesus finally trusted that God would be with him even on the cross; that God would not abandon him ultimately to the grave; indeed, that God would come so close to him in death that he would be raised back to life, and in his body, he would experience immortality.

Because Jesus believed it, because Jesus went through it, he has now carved out a space for our own faith and belief. We can now be confident that our coming closer to death, indeed even in us dying ourselves, we get no further from God. It is not that we are not afraid. It is not that Death is not a crushing and heartbreaking reality. We are. And it is. But today reminds us that Jesus has gone even there before us, and proven for us, that God accompanies us even there; that because God did not abandon Jesus to the grave, nor will he abandon us; that in our bodies we too will be raised to immortality.

The second moment is the second to last thing Jesus does and says before he dies. Several were gathered at the foot of the cross, among them Mary the mother of Jesus and then he who John calls "the beloved disciple." Jesus looks at them, turns to his mother and says, "Woman, behold your son!" And then to the disciple, "Behold your mother!" It is as a tender a scene as it is heartbreaking. And says several things to us.

It is first a reminder that loyalty to Jesus creates a new definitions of family. And second, that within that family we have a specific, Jesus-issued responsibility to take care of the vulnerable in our midst—in both the case of the cross and the case of the coronavirus, this means taking specific measures to care for the aging. This is a responsibility we are taking seriously at St. Mark's. But a third thing is happening here on a symbolic level. The beloved disciple, left intentionally unnamed throughout the Gospel, and Mary, a longstanding symbol of the Church itself, are being entrusted to one another's care. For Luke, the birth of the Church happens at Pentecost. For John, the birth of the Church happens right here, between this moment and then seconds later when the blood and water of Eucharist and baptism burst forth from Jesus' side.

Even in Jesus' dying moment, he reaches out to care for us. To be sure that we will be cared for. He creates the Church. In so doing he creates not just an institution of mutual care, but a means through which he himself, by the Spirit, will continue to be present to and care for those who follow him. Even as we lose him, we are gaining him back.

As you stare at the cross today, as you wade into that mysterious communion across space and time, as you see there inevitable reminders of mortality and fragility, see this too: God is with you now, and is not going anywhere no matter what. God is even now reaching out to you, through the arms of the Church, to hold you and to keep you forever.

Amen.