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Sermon Series: *Lenten Letters*, No. 7

Good Friday

Good Friday, April 10, 2020 (video)

Matthew 27:11-60 (NIV)

Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

"You have said so," Jesus replied.

¹² When he was accused by the chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer. ¹³ Then Pilate asked him, "Don't you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?" ¹⁴ But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge—to the great amazement of the governor.

¹⁵ Now it was the governor's custom at the festival to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. ¹⁶ At that time they had a well-known prisoner whose name was Jesus[a] Barabbas. ¹⁷ So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, "Which one do you want me to release to you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" ¹⁸ For he knew it was out of self-interest that they had handed Jesus over to him.

¹⁹ While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him."

²⁰ But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed.

²¹ "Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" asked the governor.

"Barabbas," they answered.

²² "What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" Pilate asked.

They all answered, "Crucify him!"

²³ "Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!"

²⁴ When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this man's blood," he said. "It is your responsibility!"

²⁵ All the people answered, "His blood is on us and on our children!"

²⁶ Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

²⁷ Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him. ²⁸ They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, ²⁹ and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand. Then they knelt in front of him and mocked him. "Hail, king of the Jews!" they said. ³⁰ They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. ³¹ After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

³² As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross. ³³ They came to a place called Golgotha (which means "the place of the skull"). ³⁴ There they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it, he refused to drink it. ³⁵ When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots. ³⁶ And sitting down, they kept watch over him there. ³⁷ Above his head they placed the written charge against him: this is Jesus, the king of the Jews.

³⁸ Two rebels were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁹ Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads ⁴⁰ and saying, "You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!" ⁴¹ In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. ⁴²

"He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! He's the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. ⁴³ He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" ⁴⁴ In the same way the rebels who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

⁴⁵ From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land. ⁴⁶ About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?").

⁴⁷ When some of those standing there heard this, they said, "He's calling Elijah."

⁴⁸ Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. ⁴⁹ The rest said, "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him."

⁵⁰ And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.

⁵¹ At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split ⁵² and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. ⁵³ They came out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people.

⁵⁴ When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!"

⁵⁵ Many women were there, watching from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. ⁵⁶ Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of Zebedee's sons.

⁵⁷ As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus. ⁵⁸ Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him. ⁵⁹ Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, ⁶⁰ and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away. ⁶¹ Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb.

If there is one song, one hymn that Good Friday brings to my mind, it would be "When I Survey."

*When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

Good Friday, unlike any other day, invites us to think deeply about the cross—which is what the word "survey" means, really. It means to measure it—to map it—to consider it so intently that you come away with a comprehensive understanding of it—like you would "survey" a piece of land, for example. When you're done surveying a parcel of land, you know where all the hills and valleys are; you know where its boundaries are; you know what's unique about it and what's common about it; you know where it starts and where it stops; you know it in the most complete way you can.

This is what Isaac Watts, the man who wrote the hymn, "When I Survey," was trying to say: "When I consider the cross – when I meditate upon it, I get to know all that it was – all that it is – and all that it's about.

You know, the fact is, the cross, from the beginning, was created to be "surveyed;" to be looked upon and considered deeply, by people.

The cross did not originate with Jesus. The cross – the instrument of crucifixion – was a method of execution that was practiced by the Medes and the Persians of the Ancient Near East long before Jesus' day. It was then adopted in the West by the Greeks and, especially in the first century, by the Romans.

It was the Romans who perfected it, if you will.

Although Rome did not crucify just anyone. The horrific experience of the cross was too terrible for most criminals – even those deserving death. A Roman citizen was almost never crucified. The cross – and crucifixion – was reserved for robbers, for assassins, and especially for traitors and rebels – people who posed a distinct threat to the Roman culture and government.

And that was because, crucifixion was a terribly brutal form of death. Normally, the condemned would hang alive, or barely alive, for several days. That's why the soldiers were surprised when they found Jesus dead after just a few hours.

The slowness of the death was, in fact, a big reason why the Romans – the Roman government – liked the cross: it was a lengthy testimony, to all who passed by, of the power of the Roman government. The cross proclaimed a strong warning to any who might consider insurrection. To any who might challenge Rome's governance, the cross coldly reminded them, "Just try it, and this will be your fate."

Which is precisely why Rome placed its crosses – its crucifixion sites – along her major highways in prominent places, at crossroads or on hills: so everyone who passed by could "survey the cross," and have planted firmly in their minds the misery and the anguish of the criminals who hung on them.

About a hundred years before Jesus, General Marcus Crassus crucified 6000 slaves who rose in rebellion with Spartacus. They were posted on crosses along the Appian Way from Capua to Rome – 120 miles of crosses. That's 50 crosses per mile – one every hundred feet or so.

Imagine.

Two thousand followers of the rebel, Judas, were crucified by the Romans for capturing a city – two thousand crosses posted along the roads for all to survey.

It went on and on.

So, you see, from the very beginning, crosses were meant to be *surveyed*. They were intended to be looked at – to be considered deeply. They were meant to be repulsive things – symbols of filth and punishment and shame and condemnation, things that good, normal people wanted nothing to do with.

And yet on this day, as Christians survey the cross, we find that its meaning has changed.

For followers of Jesus, today, the cross is no longer repulsive – as it was intended to be. It is no longer the

symbol of shame and condemnation that it once was. In fact, it's become, in our day, just the opposite; adorning the walls of homes, the windows of churches, and the jewelry of saints and sinners alike.

So, what has happened that such a transformation could have taken place? What kind of power has touched this shape – this symbol – such that its purposes and message to the world have been turned upside down and inside out?

What has happened is that Jesus Christ, the Son of God – the very one through whom all life was created – died there, upon a cross, so that anyone who would believe in Him – anyone who would trust Him, anyone who would put their faith in Him and give their life to follow Him – could be forgiven of their sin and have life – eternal life with God.

A little over 2000 years ago, on this day, the one perfect person – the blameless one – took on Himself a punishment He didn't deserve so that the rest of us – the guilty – could be given a freedom that we don't deserve. We've been offered a pardon – that we receive by grace through faith – through following Jesus.

And through this act of grace the cross was transformed from an object that reminds people of the fearsome power of a jealous and tyrannical government to an object that reminds people of the sacrificial character and immense love of God.

One event – one person – one payment – one offering – changed it all.

The symbol of hate and fear and death is now, and will always be, the symbol of love and joy and life and hope for all who believe.

And that's why on every Good Friday we remember not only the pain that the cross symbolizes, but also the grace. The opportunity that our loving God has made for His world.

Throughout the season of Lent this year, we have been talking about repentance. We said to repent means to go in a different direction. Repentance means change – and more than change; it means transformation.

In that sense, even the cross is an object of repentance – of new direction – of transformation of meaning and purpose and symbol.

The cross itself reminds us how everything that Jesus truly touches can't help but be changed, which is exactly why Christians have always placed crosses in their homes and on their jewelry. That's why churches place crosses in their sanctuaries and on their walls and in their windows – and even by their roads: to remind *all* who will *see* – all who will *consider* – all who will *survey* them – of all that God has done.

And so, the cross looms large in our worship on this Good Friday. It is one way we remember and worship the One who transforms.

And yet there is another way we're invited to remember, and even participate in, the transforming work of Jesus, and that is at His table – in the sharing of Holy Communion with Him.

We do that today as well, albeit a little unusually.

For this service, we've made the elements available through the past couple weeks. Let's take those now and prepare to receive them.

We are going to recite the liturgy together – I'll lead and you respond with the words as they're printed on your screen, OK?

I'll begin with the invitation:

*You who truly and earnestly repent of your sins,
who live in love and peace with your neighbors,
and who intend to lead a new life,
following the commandments of God and walking in His holy ways,
draw near with faith,
and take this holy sacrament to your comfort;
and humbly kneeling, make your honest confession to Almighty God.*

Let's pray the General Confession together:

**Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
maker of all things, judge of all people,
we confess that we have sinned,
and we are deeply grieved as we remember
the wickedness of our past lives.
We have sinned against You, Your holiness and Your
love,
and we deserve only Your indignation and anger.
We sincerely repent, and we are genuinely sorry
for all wrongdoing and every failure to do the things
we should.
Our hearts are grieved,
and we acknowledge that we are hopeless without Your
grace.
Have mercy upon us.
Have mercy upon us, most merciful Father,
for the sake of Your son, our Savior, Jesus Christ, who
died for us.
Forgive us.
Cleanse us.
Give us strength to serve and please You in newness of
life,
And to honor and praise Your name, through Jesus
Christ our Lord.
Amen.**

We continue our confession as we pray together the prayer Jesus taught His disciples.

**Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in
heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our
debts, as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from
evil:
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,
forever. Amen.**

I'll pray the Collect:

*O Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, who with great mercy
has promised forgiveness to all who turn to You with hearty
repentance and true faith, have mercy upon us,
pardon and deliver us from our sins,
make us strong and faithful in all goodness
and bring us to everlasting life, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

Let us pray together for inner cleansing:

**Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open,
all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid:
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts, by the inspiration of
the Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love You and worthily magnify
Your holy name,
through Christ our Lord. Amen.**

*Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, who gave in love Your
only Son, Jesus Christ,
to suffer death upon the cross for our redemption,
who by His sacrifice, offered once for all,
did provide a full, perfect, and sufficient atonement for the sins
of the whole world,
we come now to Your table in obedience to Your Son, Jesus
Christ,
who in His holy gospel commanded us to continue a memory
of His death until He comes again.
Hear us, O merciful Father, we ask, and grant that as we
receive this bread and this cup,
may take into ourselves His most blessed body and blood."*

On the night of His betrayal, Jesus took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and gave it to His disciples, and said, "Take and eat; this is My body – given for you; do this in remembrance of Me." And then, after supper He took the cup, and when He had given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, "Drink of this, all of you, for this is My blood of the New Testament, which is shed for you and for many, for the remission of sins; do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." This is the body of our Lord Jesus Christ, given for you. Take it and eat, remembering always that Christ died for you. Feed upon Him in your heart, by faith with thanksgiving. This is the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was shed for you. Drink this in remembrance that Christ's blood was shed for you and be thankful.

Let's pray together:

Father how we thank you today for the grace you've shown to the world through your Son, Jesus;
The grace that invites repentance,
The grace that allows change,
The grace that brings transformation – to a piece of wood and all it symbolizes to the world, and even more to a

person—to every person who will believe, trust and follow.

In a world of uncertainty, we celebrate your sure and true love for us.

We remember on this day, with both grief and joy, your sacrifice for our sins.

We invite, on this day, your transforming work in our hearts and lives in these days.

And we anticipate, even on this day, the glorious resurrection to come.

In Jesus name. Amen.

On this Good Friday, may the peace of God, which really is beyond all understanding,

Keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God,

And of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

And may the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

be yours now and forever. Amen.