

In the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The question lies at the center of Good Friday. When we look at the cross, what do we see? The popular Good Friday hymn, When I Survey the Wondrous Cross says, "See from His head, His hands, His feet. Sorrow and love flow mingled down." Sorrow and love. How can that be? How can the cross hold both at once, suffering and beauty? Death and something that looks like life. But if we stay with it for a while, if we resist the urge to move past the story of the cross too quickly, rush to Easter, pass it off as too gruesome, too difficult, too complex, it becomes a little more clear and also a little less clear.

Because in the Gospel of John, the cross is never just one thing. It is a sign. It's not just an event. It's a visible revelation that points beyond itself. On the cross, Jesus discloses who God truly is. Self-giving love, lifted up for the world to see. And the cross is also a victory. Not the way that we typically understand it, like a victory on a scoreboard at a soccer game. But a victory in the way that Christ overcomes the powers of sin, death, and violence, not by defeating them on their own terms, but undoing them through love and freeing us from them also.

And the cross is also a sacrifice in which Jesus freely offers Himself an obedience to the Father for the reconciliation of the world, a self-offering of God's own life to restore communion. It is distinctly each of these things, and it is also all of these things, all at once, all pointing us toward Christ's love for us.

The cross in the Roman world did have a very clear meaning. It was the empire's most brutal tool. To Rome, the cross meant strength because it was based in fear, and violence, and control. The cross was public. It was meant to humiliate people. There was zero credibility left for you after everyone saw you hung up on a cross. It instilled fear. It told people, "Step out of line and this is what happens." It was a tool that was meant to silence.

I wonder how that morning, before this all happened, went for Caiaphas and Pilate. When they sipped their morning coffee, did they think, "Today, I need to be prepared for something cosmic to happen." When the soldiers got their orders to light their torches and lanterns and ready their weapons to go get Jesus, did they think, "I bet they'll read about this for centuries to come." Likely not.

We step into a world that Jesus that is strikingly ordinary and that everything is functioning exactly as the world expects it to function. The power of Rome is seeking to protect Rome. Orders are orders and rules are rules. They were doing their jobs to keep peace like any other day.

But what is also striking about this moment is that Jesus is not dragged into this kicking and screaming. While the soldiers bring lanterns and torches and weapons, they might as well have left them at home because Jesus is not putting up a fight.

In John's Gospel, Jesus refuses to become what is or will be done to Him. He will not repay evil actions with evil consequences, no matter how awful it gets. Jesus then takes the cross and transforms it. He gives it power that does not rely on fear. He gives it strength that does not rely on violence. He exposes injustice without becoming unjust. He meets hatred with love, a victory that looks like defeat.

I have a small collection of crosses, some that were handed down to me by family members, others that were given to me, others that I picked up on travels, a symbol of faith. Many of them are beautiful and I cherish them. They're polished and smooth, made of fine things. But the original cross was not the polished up Easter version. It was rough wood, splintered. It was an instrument of agony. No one in the Gospel story could imagine people 2,000 years later would be going around wearing crosses for jewelry. It was not something to admire. It was something to fear.

And before we move too quickly to three days later, Good Friday asks something of us. It asked us to stay, to stay with the cross, with the suffering, with that which is terrible to carry. No need to fix it, only to stand with it. Because the cross tells us something about our world and about our God, about suffering, the pain and the grief that we all carry, about the way that fear still shapes our world and about God's love for us that wraps all of those things together. It is sorrow and it is love, some way and somehow, held together. It is the sign of God's very heart, the victory that refuses violence, the sacrifice that restores the world.

And so, we come to this Good Friday moment to stand at the foot of it and remember that we're not standing there alone. The one who hangs there has already entered into it, not at a distance, not in a theory, but fully, willingly, and even there, even on the cross, He is still Jesus, still holding us, still present, still pure love. Amen.