

The Meaning of the Cross

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

So Easter is now just one week away. Can you believe this? You know, Easter moves from year to year. And sometimes it seems like it takes forever to get to us. And sometimes it seems to sneak up on us. I don't actually know whether it's technically late or early this year because my brain doesn't think about that kind of thing but I know that it seems like it's not up on me this time I'll be I'll be ready for next week don't worry. [crowd laughs] But, it's only a week away and I'm having trouble believing that. It's just seven days until we come together in this place to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus.

But there's a lot that happens in the story of Scripture before we get to that moment of the empty tomb. Before we encounter the risen Christ, there's a whole lot of experiences that are recounted in the Gospels. And that's what I want to talk a little bit about today.

Typically on the Sunday before Easter we, we celebrate Palm Sunday. You heard this story before the children's moment about the what's called "The Triumphal Entry". Jesus coming into Jerusalem on the donkey and the palm leaves and all that stuff. And typically we talk about that during the sermon on the Sunday before Easter. But the church has a second observance that is scheduled for the Sunday before Easter and it's called Passion Sunday. And I want to talk about that one today.

Now, "passion", in this case, simply comes from the Latin word for *suffering* or *enduring*. And so, Passion Sunday is a day when we remember the suffering that Jesus endured. Before we get to the Easter Day, before we get to the Resurrection, we remember the experiences that Jesus had in the week leading up to Easter.

So Passion Sunday you typically would do quite a long reading, actually. I don't know if you looked at the Lectionary this week and looked at The Passion readings, but it's like multiple chapters of the Bible. And from Luke where Luke's chapters are like 60 verses long. Right? So, there's a lot of that. And we chose not to read that whole text in worship today but instead I'll

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give you the overview of the events. And, and then I have kind of a theological place I want to go based on that.

So Passion Sunday you typically talk about: the Last Supper, the betrayal of Jesus, his agonized prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, his arrest by the Sanhedrin, the religious structure, his trial before the imperial court with Pontius Pilate, the brutal torture he endured on the way to the cross and then of course the crucifixion itself, which is observed on Good Friday.

And I wanted to observe Passion Sunday today instead of Palm Sunday for a couple of reasons. One of which is that we don't typically get to talk about that on a Sunday. We always have done for as long as I can remember a Good Friday service. A Tenebrae service, which, I think and most people who've come to it and responded to it seem to think as well, is a very powerful meditation on the suffering and death of Jesus. And we will do that again this year on this Friday at 11 pm.

But the truth is we don't ever get as many people at that service as we have on a Sunday morning the week before Easter. And so I think it's this is an important topic for us to engage with. And I want to make sure that you hear this even if you're not able to come on Friday to the Good Friday observance.

And it, here's the thing, it actually fits really well with the theme that we've been exploring during Lent which is: Change Your Mind. If you're haven't been with us so far during this season, Lent, is a period of preparation before Easter that's typically characterized by, among other things, repentance. And the word in the New Testament language, in the Greek language, that is translated into the English word "repent" simply means to "change one's mind".

And so all through the season of Lent we've been engaging with these Scriptural stories and thinking about ways that we might be changing our mind. And how God might be sort of asking us to change our minds about certain things as part of our natural spiritual development and evolution.

And I actually think that today the thing that I'm going to suggest you might consider changing your mind about is one of the most important and powerful concepts that we encounter as people of Christian faith. I think that for many of you this might be the most important thing about which you need to change your mind. I think you might find this the most dramatic and poignant change of mind that we've encountered yet during the season of Lent.

What I want to invite you to consider changing your mind about is the answer to one of the most central questions of the Christian faith. Which is: How does Jesus save us by dying?

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How is it that Jesus is suffering and death leads to my salvation, your salvation, our salvation? Or as I've titled the message today, "What is the Meaning of the Cross?"

Because, here's the thing, whether you've grown up in church your whole life or whether you are only barely church adjacent. Whether you are a lifelong Christian or whether you're an atheist. Whether you are a failed Christian; whether you're an agnostic. Whatever you describe yourself as. And how much, no matter how much time you spent in churches before today I suspect that you have got some sense of what I will call the "standard explanation" for Jesus's death.

The answer that's usually given to the question "What's the meaning of the cross? How does it save us—that Jesus died on the cross?" And what I want to suggest to you today, this is the big challenge, is that the standard explanation for Jesus' death and how it saves us, is insufficient. It's incomplete. And it probably has become a distraction from the fuller, older, more beautiful version of the Gospel story that I want to present to you today.

So, let me 1st to get us on the same page give you a general outline of what I'm calling the "standard explanation". And you see if this sounds familiar. OK? See if the following "math problem" [chuckle] sounds familiar to you.

Number one: "Sin" is an act of spiritual law breaking and rebellion against God. And the punishment for that is death. Sin will separate us from God eternally if it's not dealt with. God is so holy and just that he cannot look upon sin because God's wrath against sin is too great so that he cannot even look upon a sinner. And in order to satisfy or abate God's wrath towards sin there has to be a punishment for that crime, for those spiritual crimes. Specifically, there has to be bloodshed. So that on the cross Jesus takes our place, he receives in his own body the punishment for the sins that he did not commit but which we did commit. And thereby he's satisfies and abates God's wrath.

And then, most importantly for the measurers within the church, if you believe all of those things it is at that point that Jesus' work has becomes effective in your own soul. And you are acquitted of your spiritual crimes. And that means you get to spend eternity with God in heaven. That's the" standard explanation".

Little show of hands, how many of you heard the Gospel told that way at one point in life? OK. Oh every hand is up in the room except the hands of the people who don't put their hands up when the pastor says "Show of hands". [congregation laughs] I see you, that's me too.

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That is the “standard explanation” of the Gospel story. But in my view there are some very real problems with that explanation. What I think has happened to get us to that explanation is that we have taken some biblical material and we have expanded it out of proportion with some other biblical material that might counter weigh it, counteract against it. And we've misinterpreted that material. And what we end up left with is what I would say is a rather gruesome and disturbing answer to the question at hand, “What is the meaning of the cross; how does Jesus' death save us?”

So here's just a few of the problems that I would see with the “standard explanation”, with a little bit of engagement with the scriptures that's often connected to the “standard explanation”. Which I think actually might speak against it somewhat. Romans 6:23 is often used as the idea that “the punishment for sin is death”. But Romans 6:23 does not say that the “punishment for sin is death”, it says that “the *wages* of sin is death”.

But you see the difference in those two words? It might be a subtle difference but I think it's an important one. ‘Wages’ are something that you receive having done something; it's your payment, it's your repayment for a task that you've done or an act that you've done. A ‘punishment’ is when something outside of you, and outside of the system in which you're working, causes injury or harm to you or pain to you, as a consequence for doing something that someone doesn't want you to do. Do you see the difference there? “The *wages* of sin is death”, that's different from saying “the punishment of sin is death.”

“Sin” separating us from God. I would say that “sin” definitely separates us from the the will of God, if you will. It separates us from the life that God wants for us if it impedes our ability to experience the fullness of God's world. And it changes what the world ends up being. Because there are consequences for those sins. “ But I am convinced”, says the Apostle Paul, “that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord. Not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth or any other thing that is created. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.” (reference to Romans 8:38-39)

As for the idea that God cannot look upon sinners because God is too holy: This ought to be patently absurd to anybody who has read the Gospels because Jesus in very nature, God, spent his whole ministry not only looking upon sinners but loving them and touching them and eating with them. In fact the whole reason that the religious authorities handed him over to the authorities of the Roman Empire, for him to be put into the empires Death Machine, was that they perceived him to be too cozy with sinners. So, if we believe that Jesus reveals for us the

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very nature of God (which the scriptures tell us that Jesus does) the idea that God cannot look upon sin ought to not even make it past the first second.

And then recall that oft quoted line from the prophet Isaiah; It speaks about his stripes, that the marks from the lashes of the whip that he was tortured with. Remember what it says, “by His stripes we are acquitted for our crimes”? NO [small laugh] All the Bible nerds, lovers of God, what does it say? “By His stripes we are [people in audience answer together] *healed*.” Once again, look at the difference between these two words: ‘acquitted’ versus ‘healed’.

Think of that moment in The Exodus where there were poisonous serpents in the camp. And the Lord told Moses to fashion a bronze serpent and put it on a pole. And [he] lifted up in the wilderness and the people, when they were bitten by the poisonous serpent, would look up to the bronze serpent. And they would be healed. The poison would stop coursing through their veins. By the way, the serpent imagery is a little bit on the nose, isn't it, for the people of faith who have the story of the garden in their minds?

And then Jesus on the rooftop with Nicodemus in John 3 says, “the Son of Man must be lifted up.” Evoking the imagery of the cross. Just as the serpent was lifted up in the wilderness. So that when we look to Jesus on the cross what we are experiencing is not so much an acquittal for the punishment of our crimes but the healing of our souls. The anti-venom of the poison that's infected us.

I'll say just one last thing about this “standard explanation” for how we are saved by the death of Jesus. And it's this: It's important to note that that way of thinking about the cross did not appear in Christian history for about 1000 years.

And now, one of our foundational values as a church at Artisan is “roots”. We want to experience the fullness of the life of God, not just as it's in the Scriptures, but [how] it's lived out in the life of God's people through the ages. So in other words, the way we understand the Scriptures has to involve some portion of us seeing how the earliest Christians understood the Scriptures.

And the earliest Christians and the Middle Age Christians didn't experience anything like this understanding of the Gospel. It wasn't until the Medieval period when St. Anselm came up with something called the “Satisfaction Theory’ that we began to see anything like Jesus being a substitute on the cross for what we deserved. Right, now we have to remember, this is the Medieval period. How many of you studied the medieval period? You know, about the lords

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and the serfs and all that stuff. Right? I remember that from school, I don't know which grade. But the whole idea for Anselm was that sinners had offended the honor of the feudal lord.

This is actually what it was about. And the punishment had to satisfy the honor of that lord because the the the surf (you know, the peasant class) had offended the honor. And the punishment was very severe, in that case. And Anselm looked around the world and saw the way things were structured, and saw in that a metaphor for what "salvation" was and what the cross was doing.

And it wasn't until 500 years after that, that we start to land on all this legal language. And where you get the idea of having committed a crime and been pronounced guilty in a courtroom. And then Jesus stepping in and saying he would take the punishment as our substitute. Right? That didn't show up until the Reformation Era when John Calvin and Martin Luther started to carry lots of weight theologically. And Calvin and Luther got a *lot* of mileage out of this legal language and it picked up steam. And it's never stopped!

Why do you suppose that Calvin and Luther was so drawn to the legal language? (That does exist in scripture. But it's not nearly as overwhelming as you would think, based on how we talk about salvation.) Why would Calvin and Luther have latched on to that? [somebody shouts an answer. Audio uncertain] They were both lawyers! [laughter]

Now, I don't, I'm not going to make any cheap lawyer jokes. We love our lawyers. We have some lawyers in the congregation. There were at least two of them in the in the first service today. But listen, when the only tool you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.

And so, for these two lawyers, who have really-it's been impossible to overstate [their] influence on Western Christian thought, not only in the Protestant Church but I think it bled backwards into the Catholic Church too- this is what they saw in the Gospel. And this is what they gave us. And this is what we still receive today as the *only* way of understanding how the cross saves us.

Now if you've been around Artisan for any length of time you've probably heard me say something along the lines of: We should avoid defining ourselves by what we are *not* and instead we should define ourselves by what we *are*. I say that a lot. I really do believe that one of the problems that our society has, is that we are we don't really have any imagination for the language we use to describe what our beliefs are and what our thoughts are. I'm not talking just about the church I'm talking about everything.

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How many of the— (Oh, let's just take something non-inflammatory)—how many political social media posts have you made or read, that took some form of “I am not ‘blank’. I do not think like ‘blank’”? Do you see how that's a definition of oneself by something that you don't believe, right?

You might argue that there have been entire major national political campaigns that seem to think that simply saying “I am not ‘blank’” would be enough to win. And they weren't. Lord, save us from that happening again.

But it goes everywhere. It's it's in the church. It's in our politics. I mean it is even in something as silly as being a sports fan and these rivalries. I'm not nearly, like, into a sports as much as I used to be but I used to really like the N.F.L. And I was a fan of the football team from Washington D.C., the one with a racist name. And I don't care about football at all. Football for me is a way to take a nap after church on Sundays. No offense, if you like football, it's totally fine. But here's the point: I don't care whether the Washington football team wins their game. But their big rivals, the Dallas Cowboys? Boy do I love it when they lose. [crowd laughter] Isn't that the dumbest thing you've ever heard? [someone shouts from the crowd -audio not clear] I guess the Cowboys-- Ah, thank you, there's a, there's a Cowboys fan in the room. [crowd laughs] Well, we've got lawyers, we've got Cowboys fans, it's all right.

So, I don't want to, I don't want to define ourselves by what we're not. And that includes with our theology. But in this case, the discussion of salvation and the meaning of the cross, (having been almost entirely focused on legal metaphors and the entire Gospel, having been shoved aside and replaced with a narrow little slice of Biblical imagery), I felt it was important to spend a few minutes trying to unwind all of that.

You might spend the next week trying to unwind all that. If you've never heard me preach on this kind of thing before you might have just had the top of your head taken off. Because you've never heard the Gospel explained any other way than the one that I just gave you for the “standard explanation”.

We needed to unwind that a little bit. Not only because I think that there are much better ways to think and talk in a biblically informed way about how we understand the cross of Jesus to save us. But also because, as you know if you have been part of the *Rethinking Incarceration* groups and done our winter read, there are all kinds of consequences of this Gospel of Retributive Justice. Consequences, that I'm sorry to say, go way beyond the walls of the church. Which permeated the American imagination and, like, cultural consciousness long before America started to become more secularized. And which have kept their place, in the criminal justice system is the case in point right now, but it's all over the place. The theology that we

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possess and that we're given has significant consequences for how we think about the world around us.

So sometimes you can't have a discussion about what IS before you disentangle yourself from what IS NOT.

So then, now we get to the question of the sermon title: What IS the meaning of the cross? How is it that Jesus is death saves us? I do have a list of answers for those of you who like to make lists and write them down and bring them home. [crowd laughs] But you need to know before I give you any of the lists that I am probably going to be spending the rest of my life thinking and dreaming and wondering about this question. It's not the kind of thing that I believe can actually be apprehended and wrestled to the ground and put up in a neat little box I think that's part of the problem with the "standard explanation" is that it is very neat and tidy. It's gruesome, but it's very clear.

So I don't think I have perfect answers. What I think I have is partial images of what picture might be emerging from the Scriptures. And what I can give you is a list of these ideas and maybe one of them will spark some joy. [laughter and unknown words] I just have this whole Marie Kondo thing right now. OK we need to, [more laughter] we need to tidy up our theological houses here. Right? You know, *substitutionary atonement*, no, this does not spark joy. [big laughter from all] OK. That joke is going to mean nothing to people in like, two years. But, it means nothing to some people right now.

But, what I hope is that you might consider something or some things that I'm about to say as a starting point for you to think more deeply about this, and think differently about it.

So how is it that the death of Jesus saves us? Here's a few answers.

The death of Jesus saves us first of all, I want to say, as *part* of the story but not the whole story. The story of Jesus does not start with the cross. Where does it start? It starts in a manger. It actually starts in a womb. Let's not jump to even, to the to the born Jesus. Let's talk about, let's talk about Mary. What if, what if we built our understanding of salvation not around the death of Jesus but around the incarnation of God? Of God taking on human form and moving into the neighborhood to live with us. What would our view of salvation be? And what would the consequences for our, the way we view the world be if we started to think about it that way?

What about the teaching of Jesus? There are lots of people who think "Well, Jesus was a historical figure. He was a great teacher but nothing more than that." And we are so quick to

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dismiss people who say that. Because, those of us who are Christians, most of us have a much higher view (so to speak) of Jesus than that. But imagine if every person in the world obeyed every teaching of Jesus. Do you think the world would be saved in some sense? I actually think it would. So let's not dismiss the people who just want to focus on the teaching of Jesus, let's actually listen to them. Let's actually try to do that ourselves, even as we hold these theological statements to be true about him. Believing the right thing about Jesus does not get us off the hook for doing what he said.

What about Jesus's acts of healing? What if we saw our ministry as healers in the world? What about the way he up ended the social structures of his day? What about the way he ate with sinners?

But if we look at any one of these things, or better yet all of them, as the way that Jesus saves us. Not just in his death but in his birth, in his life, in his teachings, and yes, Easter is next week, in his resurrection?

Did you notice, by the way, that that "standard explanation" for how his death saves us does not seem to require a resurrection? I didn't say anything about the empty tomb when I gave that explanation because I didn't have to. Because it's all about sinners being punished; but Jesus being punished instead. Doesn't require a resurrection.

So the first way that Jesus' death saves us is as part of the story but not the whole story.

Jesus' death saves us by flipping everything we thought we knew upside down. From the Ancient Near Eastern worldview to the modern day, blood sacrifice required to appease an angry God. Well, no more. Jesus was a last one. Let's talk about a scapegoat mechanism.

The "Scapegoat" was this the ritual that the people had where they would put a—place all the sins of the whole community on an animal and then cast it out. And that was, yes it was a religious ritual in the Ancient Near East but it's also how we view the entire world. Let's place all the blame on one individual and do everything we can to cast them out away from ourselves so that we don't have to bear any responsibility for ourselves. That was also up ended and ended on the cross. We still do it but this is, this is God's way of saying "No that's not the way it is going to work anymore. Jesus is the last scapegoat."

You think the powerful are always going to crush the weak? You think violence in any sense is redemptive? Do you think it's ever the answer for something that's gone wrong? Well, on the cross Jesus says "No" to all of that. "Father forgive them. Put the sword away. They don't know

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what they're doing." So Jesus' Passion and his death save us by upending and flipping over all the things we thought we knew about how the world is structured.

I'll give you another one. Jesus' death and suffering save us because it's an act of profound identification with human beings. Jesus on the cross saying, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?", expresses the deepest depths of lament that every human at one point or another experiences to a certain degree.

He also, by the way, is quoting from Psalm 22; the opening line of Psalm 22 is: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And I think by implication he's asking us to look at the rest of that Psalm too. Because it starts with that sentiment and it ends with something very different. So there's your homework this week, read Psalm 22. Start out by thinking about Jesus saying it on the cross. And then imagine Jesus saying all of the words of Psalm 22, not just the first few.

Jesus's death on the cross saves us because it calls us to acknowledge and be aware of our own sins. You thought I was going to forget about sin, didn't you? No. Jesus' death on the cross is the result of the sins of the people. He reminds us of our sins, our individual sins and our corporate sins. Our occasional "one off" kinds of sins and our systemic sins.

It was not God who killed Jesus on the cross. It was an evil empire and evil religious structure in cahoots with each other. And where do human beings go when they want power and authority in the world today? Nations and religions. And so, Jesus on the cross ought to remind us, if nothing else, of our own sins, our own complicity, our own participation in those same systems that killed him.

I could go on and on. As I told you I've been thinking about this. And this is one of the things that has like lit up my, my brain and soul for years now. And I expect it to continue. I don't see any stopping to how deep this well is. So I can give you more but I want to just end with, with one last one. One last way for Jesus' death to save us. One last meaning of the cross.

And that is this: it provides a model for us. For how we ought to think about the world and how we ought to interact with the world. And here I will return to the Epistle reading that we heard just before the sermon and I invite you to turn with me if you'd like. If you are a visual reader please turn to Philippians chapter two, it's 954 in these red Bibles. If you're an auditory learner just feel free to listen.

But here the Apostle Paul wants to give us a model for how to live. He wants to give us a brand new worldview. He wants to, if you will pardon the expression, get us to "change our minds." It's exactly what he says. "Before you thought about things *this* way, your mind was set in *this*

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way. Philippians 2:5: “ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him [that was the resurrection] and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” [Philippians 2:5-11]

Could you imagine if that actually became our mindset? Jesus, though is in very nature God, did not consider that something to be exploited or grasped or leveraged, but rather emptied himself. The Greek word is *kenosis*, emptied himself of all of that. He became a servant. He suffered at the hands of his accusers. He submitted himself even to the point of death because of his love for humankind. Now that is something that will save us.

And if, if your mind will change from this idea that the whole world is populated by guilty evil worms who need to be punished, and who only will avoid punishment by this substitution trick, that's going to have some serious consequences for how you view your neighbors. It's going to have even more serious consequences for how you view your enemies. Do you see how this is destroying the world and our theology is perpetuating it? No, instead let the mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. When confronted with violence he responded with forgiveness and love.

That is the kind of thing that can save us. May it be true for you, may be true for me. May be true for Artisan Church. And may have become truer with each passing day for our whole world. Amen.

On this Passion Sunday. Perhaps more than on other weeks it's fitting that we respond to the Scriptures being proclaimed at the Communion table. It's fitting that we respond with these elements, these symbols, these presence of Jesus—broken, battered and bleeding. This is the Table, as we sometimes say, not of the church but of the Lord Jesus himself. And it's made ready for all who want to find him here. So you don't have to be a member of our church to take communion here. You don't to be a member of any church to take communion here. If you are wanting what Jesus is offering He invites you to come and receive. His body, his blood; may it be for you the real presence of the Savior. May it be an act of remembrance of his sacrifice. Maybe be sustenance and strength on a wearying spiritual journey. And may it be an act of unity with each other in the world.

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As we sing a couple more songs together to also be a member of the prayer team at the back of the room who would be happy to pray with you in person should you wish to have that happen. And your kids are probably ready to come see you again and see all of us in worship together with us again. They can come and take Communion or you can get them right after that. But How ever the Spirit is speaking to you I invite you to respond in these various ways. Our table's open, please come on.

[end of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information visit us at ArtisanChurch.com