

“The Cross of The King”

Introduction: Like many of you, I have a few crosses in my house and in my office. A couple of my favorites come from Croatia and Ecuador and were given to me as gifts when our church was there on mission trips. Many of you also have beautiful crosses that hang from your necks that you wear as jewelry. When people see these various crosses, and observe their craftsmanship, they often say, “nice cross!” When I look at them I can think the same thing. But know that in the first century, “nice cross” is something that no one, and I mean no one, would ever have said. Why not? Because the cross was the very worst form of execution, reserved for the very worst form of criminal. Wearing one around your neck or displaying one on a wall or shelf in your home would be like wearing or displaying an electric chair. And I’ve never heard anyone say, “nice electric chair.”

All of which means that for Jesus to be put to death on a cross, well it was the worst form of scandal. What kind of king would allow himself to be sent to the electric chair, and without even putting up a fight?! And that actually is the question as we make our way to the cross in the season of Lent. What kind of king is he that was crucified on a cross? We need, as we take this journey to the cross, to see it clearly. If the cross is merely something “nice,” then we’re not seeing the scandalous way that God has freed us from death and leads us to life.

I. “Who do people say I am?”

A. Last week we looked at the healing of a blind beggar named Bartimaeus, whose story we find at the end of Mark 10. I mentioned that this account serves as a bookend with another healing of a blind man, one who lived in the town of Bethsaida, and that account began our reading this morning. In between the “bookends” of these healings, Jesus tells his disciples about his upcoming suffering, death, and resurrection. I suggested last week that the accounts of these healings are used by Mark to highlight the difficulty the disciples of Jesus had in seeing clearly what Jesus was telling them about what was going to happen to him. And while I can’t be sure, my hunch is that the bit about his rising again, as difficult as that would be to take in, probably went in one ear and out the other because they would have been incredibly hung up on his statement that he would have to die.

B. Jesus actually raised the issue when he asked his disciples, as they were walking along, another one of his penetrating, thought-provoking questions: “Who do people say I am?” Along with the one we heard him ask last week, “What do you want me to do for you?” (10:51), this is an incredibly significant question, in fact, perhaps the most important one anyone could ever answer. This, after all, is the fellow whose arrival in the world caused time to be measured by AD instead of BC! This is the fellow who perhaps subtly here, and less subtly later on, takes the verb “I am,” the way in which the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob revealed himself to Moses (Ex. 3:14), and declares, “I am the bread of life; I am the light of the world; I am the gate for the sheep and the good shepherd; I am the resurrection and the life; I am the way and the truth and the life; I am the true vine” (and nothing good comes unless you are connected to me). So that’s an important question!

C. Moreover, Jesus asked it in a place, Caesarea Philippi, a town on the northernmost border of Israel, that for centuries had been the center of pagan worship. It was here, for instance, that Herod the Great had built a huge, gleaming marble temple in honor of the Roman emperor, who was considered to be a god. In this pagan outpost, Jesus was asking a question about who really was God, who really was in control, and what really power was all about. In response, the disciples offered that the public opinion was leaning toward John the

Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets. All of these figures were individuals who had come to prepare the way for the Messiah – the long-anticipated anointed redeemer and king – and so the assumption was that Jesus was just another one like them. While certainly this is a more favorable view of Jesus than some we've already seen, like he was out of his mind or an instrument of the devil, they did not hit on the truth. So, Jesus asked his disciples what they thought and their spokesman, Peter, hit the buzzer and shouted out the answer, "You are the Messiah."

## II. What Messiah Means

A. It appeared that Peter got the answer right, but did he? Why would Jesus warn them not to tell anyone about him? The fact is that Jesus didn't want any false news about him to be spread! So, he put a lid on his disciples' answer until they could see him clearly, until they could understand what Messiah really means. Peter certainly lifted Jesus out of the role of preparer and put him in the role of rescuer. And that was good. However, like the blind man back in Bethsaida, who didn't see clearly the first time Jesus placed his hands upon him, Peter got the title "Messiah" right but vastly underestimated the job description. Jesus needed to set him and his disciples straight before they spread false news to the crowds. Any understanding of Jesus without the necessity of the cross would be false news. It would not free us from death nor lead us to life.

B. How do we know Peter was still seeing Jesus in a fuzzy fashion? Because when Jesus spoke about his upcoming death, Peter went nuts. He took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. Can you just try to picture that for a moment?! Jesus went on to identify that Satan was at work here because Satan would have liked nothing better than for Jesus to skip the cross. That was what he had tried to lure Jesus into doing during the three wilderness temptations. But Jesus was on his guard and having none of it.

C. What had gotten Peter so irked, so scandalized? Essentially, by putting "Son of Man" and "must suffer" together, Jesus was combining two very different job descriptions. Son of Man was a divine figure from Daniel 7 who was going to come with his heavenly hosts and set everything right in the world: "He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed" (Da. 7:14). This would've been Peter's expectation and hope. But then Jesus throws the curve. With "must suffer," he brings in Isaiah 53 and the picture of the suffering servant: "But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed" (Is. 53:5). Though it wasn't clear when Isaiah wrote this who he was talking about, Jesus now applies it to himself.

Putting it all together, Jesus was explaining to his disciples that he would not be going to Jerusalem to celebrate but to become a sacrifice. He would not be taking control but giving it up. He would not sit on a throne but be strung up on a cross. He was not going to win, apparently, but to lose.

Illustration: Since it's freezing up here and it's spring raining down in Florida, we can talk a little baseball for just a minute and hope that warms us up! You might be aware that there is a new Red Sox pitcher, obtained in an off-season trade from the White Sox, a lefty named Chris Sale. Many expect him to be the ace or "savior" of the pitching staff this year. But imagine as this spring goes on that Sale starts talking about his unique strategy, which is begin each game by walking the first nine batters he faces! Red Sox nation would be in an uproar!! No one wins championships, not to mention games, that way.

D. Well, Jesus explanation to Peter was just as stunning. No one wins kingdoms and defeats sin and evil and death by being sacrificed, and no self-respecting king would allow himself to be killed, would he? A king who let's himself be killed like a heinous criminal would be no king at all, right? But Jesus says that this *must* happen to him, and therein lies the scandal.

### III. The Scandal of the Cross

A. The scandal of the cross is Jesus saying, "I've got to die. If I don't, neither you, nor the universe, will be rescued." This is not easy to take. As Paul would later write, preaching Christ crucified is a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks (1 Cor. 1:23). Peter seems to be the first to stumble, but we can be right behind him. We don't like to give control to someone else, don't like to think we can't do something ourselves, and don't like to think of ourselves as that sinful or needy! The nub of the issue is this: How is it possible for a holy and righteous God to declare that unrighteous humans are righteous, bring them into his midst, and invite them to join him in his purposes, without compromising his character or allowing the moral order of the universe to run free? God's answer is the cross. It's the place where his love and his justice meet. In Jesus, God gave himself to satisfy his justice, paying the penalty for our sin, and out of love he rescued us from his judgment. The Messiah would conquer evil and sin and death not by killing but by being killed, by absorbing all that evil could throw at him, and rising from the dead anyway.

B. This season of Lent that we're in is a very cross-focused time of year. As I mentioned on Ash Wednesday, it begins by having ashes pressed into our foreheads in the shape of a cross to remind us of our mortality and it ends on Easter when the fragrance of flowers fills the air, reminding us of the gift of new life that Jesus has achieved for us through his death, on the cross. In the middle days we reflect on various ways the cross shapes and impacts our life.

Illustration: One of those moments came for me during a conversation I was having with a group of folks from various walks of life and belief about the meaning of life. Think we figured it out? Think again! But we did come to the conclusion after a couple of hours that we were all seeking affirmation, and that without it, you really couldn't live very well. As we went around the room, many shared that they got their affirmation either from friends, or themselves, or their accomplishments.

To be sure, all of these sources can provide us with helpful affirmation. But I'm not sure how lasting or secure these sources truly are. We can let ourselves down, our friends can disappoint us, and our accomplishments are only as good as the most recent one. By the way, did you notice how quickly the New England Patriots began talking about chasing down a sixth Super Bowl victory? It seems like it only took about 24 hours for their record-breaking fifth victory to begin to fade!

So I wonder in this season of Lent if the cross might be a place we need to go for the lasting and secure affirmation we need. For the cross reveals not how much our hearts are set upon God, but how unshakably God's heart is set upon us. The cross reveals the scandalous lengths God went to love us when we had done nothing to deserve it. That is an affirmation that is lasting and secure, that doesn't depend on my performance or the constancy of my friends. That is an affirmation that, if I can see it clearly, makes the cross a nice and beautiful thing, not because of its craftsmanship but because of the Christ who hung there for me.