

A startling sight, isn't it¹? This is a cross that you could actually kill a person with. Once the emotional impact settles a little, the sight of it can really make you think. A real cross like this one can make you think about death, about suffering, about pain. I wonder if it makes you think about Christmas.

Now that may sound incredibly odd, because that cross is a bit bleak to be any part of most people's idea of a joyful Christmas. And yet Christmas and the cross of Good Friday are directly connected. If you thumb through our hymnal, you'll discover that most of the writers of our Christmas hymns knew that. So did all of the Christian theologians of the first five centuries of church history. We don't hear about the connection between the two very much anymore.

We don't often make the connection in 21st century America anymore for two reasons: First, there is an increasing influence on Christmas from secular sources and from parts of the church that want to keep Christmas focused on a sweet little baby and his doting parents, shepherds, lambs and angels. I smile when I see those images too. They are sentimental images that make Christmas trees look happy and cards pretty. And I understand that if I put a picture of this cruel thing on the family Christmas letter, my friends and family would find me more than a little dark.

But there is more to think about today. Perhaps there is something we *can* do about the *other* reason we don't tend to make a connection between Christmas and Good Friday.

The second reason we don't tend to make the connection in 21st century America is the spread of forms of Christianity that have been heavily influenced by Calvinism and other more modern threads that have popularized the habit on Good Friday of imposing and embracing guilt and shame that Jesus had to die for us, as if somehow we, as individuals, personally drove nails into his hands and feet.

¹ The sermon references a large, free-standing wooden cross in the center of the chancel.

Our ancestors in the faith saw something very different. Early theologians and church people understood that God created an astonishing solution to a problem. St. Augustine of Hippo went to the Prologue of John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” That is to say that, from the beginning of God’s creating, the Word through whom everything was created, was part of the divine reality that we call the Trinity. The Word was Second Person of the Trinity and the Word was God. However, Augustine and others noticed, God doesn’t have a body and God can’t die. For these early theologians, God could not fully redeem humanity without becoming one with three human realities.

The first reality is sin. God’s *shalom*, God’s peace, is God’s desire and gift for us that the prophets define God’s *shalom* as the flourishing, wholeness and joy of all beings. Sin is anything that disrupts God’s *shalom*. Now, because we all disturb or resist or impede that *shalom*, there is not a soul alive who is not a sinner. And much as we delude ourselves, there’s nothing we can do about that. Jesus pointed out over and over and over that sin has less to do with specific acts and everything to do with what is going on inside us: our attitudes, our motivations and our intentions—these constitute our sinful nature.

The second human reality is evil. In seeing everything created, God said, “it is very good.” The consequences of our sinful nature result in forces that are parasites to the good that God creates. Part of our nature is the desire to be in charge, to be in control of some part of God’s creation. We all do it and the residual effect builds up in ways that are destructive to life and community. As God’s *children*, we are not always terribly attuned to what God, our parent, sees for us. Loving our enemy, for example, seems counter-intuitive. Only God can see that the evil cycle of hate and mistrust can only be broken by someone willing to be vulnerable and to take a chance on loving another. We want a world where love wins, even if we don't realize that loving enemies is the only way to get there.

Both sin and evil spring from the third human reality: death. Every person who is born will die. Every person who is alive will suffer. Whether it is suffering from broken hearts, broken relationships, broken minds or broken bodies, we will all suffer and we will all die. What Augustine and many early Christians noticed was that the way that God chose to help us overcome sin and evil and death required God to take on bodily form. And what better part of God to manifest physically than the Word, the Second Person of the Trinity, the very agent of Creation.

But the Word of God did not have a body. Until Christmas. Until Christmas, when Mary and Joseph said “yes.” Christmas when the miraculous incarnation of God in human flesh allowed God to suffer pain and rejection and to die in the same way that we do. God manifested bodily, so that Jesus Christ as God incarnate could suffer, and die and draw us into the resurrection life of the Trinity in God’s everlasting *shalom*. That’s what God chose to do for us.

You and I did not cause the murder of Christ by being terrible people. God chose to open a path that transcends and transforms human reality. By Christ’s wounds, we are healed. If we remember that when we imagine what took place on a cross like this one, the startling truth of God’s love can fill us with awe and wonder, rather than guilt and shame. Marvel, then, for just a moment at the foot of this cross, at the kind of love that would be willing to go this far to give us new life.

In the second creation narrative in the book of Genesis, there is a story about people trying to be God, just as we do. And in that story is a tree—the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. When the humans ate the fruit from that tree before God could give it as a gift, they disrupted God’s yearning for them. They became prematurely aware of God as a great Other, resulting in death as a new human reality.

Now, there was a second tree in the Garden, called the Tree of Life. And God, so the story goes, expelled the humans from the Garden knowing that they would seek to eat the fruit of the Tree of Life, which would grant immortality before God could give life eternal as a gift. For the early Christian mothers and fathers, God resolved our human

error by taking on flesh, so that the wood of the cross could become for us the Tree of Life for us. And now, having transformed our experience of sin and evil, suffering and death, God gives us the gift of the fruit of that tree every time we receive the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist.

None of us has the power within themselves to fix everything we have broken, as individuals, as the church or as communities. That ability belongs only to the God who loves us more powerfully than death; God who has already overcome death for us through Jesus Christ, so that we might see each other and ourselves in God's own light and love, living in God's gift of *shalom*.

That's why we call this Good Friday.