

So many questions. Why did this happen? Why did God let Jesus die? Was it God's will? For five weeks of Lent, we've heard about God's extravagant, unrelenting love. But then today, after our triumphant procession, we are left slack-jawed at the brutal conclusion of Luke's Passion story.

So many questions. Why does Jesus die? Why this way? Did God choose cruel agony and a shameful death for Jesus? Why?

People have been asking these questions for centuries. Saints, theologians and faithful Christians throughout our history have sweated over answers called "theories of atonement." Some say that Christ's death substituted for our own to appease an offended God. Others say that only Jesus could fulfill God's requirement for a sufficiently holy sacrifice. Still others say that Jesus gave his life as a ransom payment for our sins, either to God or to Satan.

In recent decades, black American theologians, feminist theologians and scholars have suggested alternative theories that are not based on a blood-thirsty or abusive God. Anglican theologians and many others propose that Jesus did not die to satisfy an arbitrary and punishing God. Instead, Jesus' death revealed some of God's nature. Jesus was the embodiment of God's nature to liberate, rather than to dominate; to enlighten rather than to inflict punishment.

God did not wish death for Jesus. Our human infatuation with death and power murdered God's gift of *shalom*. Jesus was an alternative, and consequently a threat, to the violent, self-protective imperial Roman power structure. Jesus rode into the city defenselessly radiating God's peace, inspiring the hopes of his fellow Jews and others that their dignity and liberty would at last be restored. In activating that hope, Jesus

¹ This sermon owes a debt of gratitude to Fr. James Alison, Delores Williams, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and René Girard.

drew the attention of fearful religious and political authorities who felt the need to preserve a system that served their own interests at the expense of others.

That being said, our questions persist. But instead of jumping right to next Sunday's resurrection, our challenge throughout Holy Week is to live patiently in our questioning, to abide in a state of unknowing. Holy Week is our opportunity to reflect on what the suffering and death of a *triumphant* Jesus really means.

We began this day as though we were walking with Jesus to the gates of Jerusalem, only to be reminded of the fear-based dynamics of empire-building. On Maundy Thursday, we will take an after-dinner walk with Jesus to the garden of Gethsemane, where Judas will betray him. On Good Friday, we will gather at the foot of a cruel cross, much like the one where Jesus breathed his last words. Today, we are left with the women at the tomb filled with questions.

We are not alone in our questioning, which may give some small comfort. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus repeatedly refers to his impending passion, and his closest followers repeatedly misunderstand or misinterpret what he says. In the end, some of them simply reject his predictions as too dreadful to accept. When the unimaginable actually does happen, they are shocked, but shocked well beyond what you and I experience in hearing this story.

You see, in first century Mediterranean thought, especially under the bruising control of the Roman Empire, death was the final word. Death not only silenced the voice of nonconformist rebels, but it restored life to how it was before, making those who do the killing appear to be decent, reasonable people. The perception was that the dead person must have been responsible for causing whatever adversity they were accused of or else they would not have been killed. Killing Jesus must have been God's will. Jesus must have broken God's law. The miracles he performed must have been from the devil. The loving relationship that Jesus claimed with God must have been blasphemy. Death on a tree, according to Deuteronomy, meant that Jesus had died under God's curse. His death was a triumph for the powers of empire.

So the crowds who had gathered to witness the spectacle returned home beating their breasts and the disciples are stunned into questioning their entire worldview. Jesus' acquaintances stood at a distance watching, waiting, eager for answers. The teachings about God that Jesus gave them were formally impeccable, so why did some of their religious leaders find him dangerous? Still more puzzling, why did a Roman centurion, of all people, give voice to a total reversal of the predominant worldview: "Certainly this man was *innocent*"?

Living in a state of unknowing is anxiety provoking, so just imagine the anxiety of the disciples scrambling to find meaning. Anxiety is the body's way of informing us that something has changed or is about to change—not whether the change is for good or for ill, mind you, just that there is something different. The disciples knew that Jesus had changed something important, but they were left with so few answers.

And yet...and yet, Jesus *did* answer the most astonishing question. At the beginning of our reading, "when the hour came," Jesus took his place at table with the apostles to share dinner. He took a loaf of bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given...for you."

"*For you.*" For Simon Peter, who is about to deny him three times; for Judas, who is about to hand him over; for all the rest of the who are about to leave him alone with in the garden. For all people, for all time. For you and for me. "This is my body, which is given...*for you.*"

One incredible answer to the single most important question.

Christians still probe the mystery of Jesus' death, searching for meaning, but above and beyond all our questions, Jesus has left no doubt that everything that he suffered—the humiliation and shame, the anguish and rejection—Jesus suffered all that so that all people might have life and light and hope. Jesus was true to God even if that meant he had to suffer the humiliation and pain of the cross. His fidelity to God's deepest nature shattered our illusions about death and opened a new path to freedom and life for us.

Furthermore, Luke makes it abundantly obvious that Jesus gave himself willingly. The last words from the lips of Luke's Jesus were: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Having said this, he exhaled his last breath.

Let me be clear. Despite the abuse and torture heaped upon his body, the Empire did not take his life. Jesus gave his life, he commended his Spirit to God, of his own free will. Jesus chose to be obedient to God, true to God's nature, even unto death on the cross.

Seeking the meaning of the death of Jesus is the work of a lifetime for each Christian and, as Episcopal theologian Fr. Urban Holmes has pointed out, "each new age must work at reconstituting the meaning of the experience of God." We will always have questions. But one answer will remain consistent and reliable—the answer to one question, "for whom did Jesus die?" "This is my body, which is given...for you."

So much of Christ's passion and death will remain a mystery. We may never fully comprehend *why* God's love abides with us, but we can let the image of Christ on the cross remind us that God's unfathomable love abides *for* us always. We may never fully comprehend *why* Jesus choose to give his life instead of fighting or running away, but we can come to this table trusting in God's tangible and tenacious love.

It is, after all, given for you.