

BEYOND CRUCIFIXATION:

WE DON'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE

A SERMON PREACHED AT SAINT JOHN'S PARISH

LAST SUNDAY OF PENTECOST SEASON: "CHRIST THE KING" SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 21, 2004

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Appointed texts that provide the context for this sermon:

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD. Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So . . . I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD. The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness." Jeremiah 23:1-6

1 God is our refuge and strength, *
a very present help in trouble.

7 The nations make much ado, and the kingdoms are shaken;
melt away.

***God has spoken, and the earth shall**

8 The LORD of hosts is with us; *
the God of Jacob is our stronghold.

10 It is he who makes war to cease in all the world; *
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear,
and burns the shields with fire.

11 "Be still, then, and know that I am God; *
I will be exalted among the nations;
I will be exalted in the earth."

12 The LORD of hosts is with us; *
the God of Jacob is our stronghold. (portions of Psalm 46)

... He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ... For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Colossians 1:11-20

And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." Luke 23:35-43

"For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to him self all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross."

The Collect prayer appointed for this morning reminds us it is God's will to "restore all things" through Christ who is "King of kings, and Lord of lords." It acknowledges "the peoples of the earth" are "divided and enslaved by sin," and beseeches that, in Christ, we might be brought under "his most gracious rule."

In the Bible, we often read wherever "sin" occurs (brokenness, separation, estrangement), death (of some sort or another) follows, as a consequence; to that extent that you might say you can't have one without the other. It is not difficult to witness ourselves how the peoples of the earth are divided, and thereby, enslaved by *death*.

If it is God's will to restore us all in Christ through his "most gracious rule," is this some form of arcane religious triumphalism that will only fan the flames of divisive and obsessive fanaticism? Or is our "Lord of lords" one who – in the words of the psalmist this morning – looks upon the nations who "make much ado;" then "breaks the bow, and shatters the spear," by transforming the cruciform of this world into a repudiation of death, and the promise of new life? Has the God of all humankind, through the cross of Christ, shown *us* a way to dwell beyond a world consumed with death; that we might bring to this world the promise of Paradise through a different "rule" of life?

Well, in my collection of *stranger-than-(religious)-truth* stories plucked from the news, here's a new addition I heard last week: For years, high schools in Texas included "Cross-dress Day" as part of "Spirit Week" leading up to the local homecoming weekend. Boys would dress up as girls, and vice versa. Rough and tumble football players would masquerade as cheerleaders; and bouncy pom-pom girls would pose as linebackers and wide receivers.

But apparently a conservative religious group recently accused the school of promoting a "homosexual agenda" and fostering the gay lifestyle. So from now on, cross-dressing day will instead be replaced by "Camo-Day," when all the students dress up like soldiers in camouflage uniforms. ...

I just don't know what it is about Texas. On Thursday I watched this guy interviewed on TV. Outfitted in hunter's camouflage, he stood in front of the news cameras on his ranch in the north Texas hill country, explaining his new, innovative .com start-up called "Live-shot.com" — which advertises on the Web as a "real time, online shooting experience." From the website:

"LIVE-SHOT is similar to a trip to the rifle range with one very notable exception. Everything is done through a computer and the internet. A paid membership will allow for access to the range viewing camera(s) at any time. Members can then schedule a reserved session time which allows exclusive control of the shooting system to fire live ammunition from a real hunting rifle at a choice of various reactive targets."

Reading on, I realized initially they only offer target-shooting. But soon you'll actually have your choice of animals and a live hunt; from Barbary sheep, to blackbuck antelope, to wild boar. After a successful kill, additional services will include taxidermy arrangements and trophy mounting, as well as shipping the processed animal for your personal consumption. If you choose not to eat what you kill, you can donate the meat to an organization called Hunters for the Hungry. Live-Shot.com doesn't say if the donation is tax-deductible.

Now, if this internet entrepreneur is smart he'll add the red-tail fox to his menu options; that is, since the British Parliament last week overcame opponents with the House of Lords, and banned fox hunting for good in England and Wales. Generally despised by British urbanites, the country sport was generally viewed as a noxious pastime of the aristocratic elite; as well as unjustifiable animal cruelty, where the live prey is torn apart by the hounds. How fortunate then, that the English gentry can still partner up with a North Texas rancher, and have a terribly jolly good time nonetheless.

But why stop there, I thought to myself? The possibilities are endless. With the military now filling its ranks with the video-game generation of American youth, why couldn't we all sign up to fight the global war on terror from the computer in our den, or laptop by the pool?

The military already has armed-and-ready unmanned surveillance drones in the skies over Afghanistan and Iraq, operated by computer operators at command and control centers stateside. Why couldn't we have online shooting galleries set up at discrete checkpoints in, say, Fallujah or Mosul; then just wait for any suspected insurgent or terrorist to pass by? Based on first-hand accounts this week of American soldiers on the ground in street-to-street combat, our guess would be as good as theirs as to who's who ...

If this all sounds too ludicrous and farfetched, that's a good thing. All we have to do then is determine where we crossed over the line from sane and rational, to absurd and deadly.

It all makes me wonder sometimes: Do we have a fixation with death? I don't mean the inescapable fact of our own mortality, which we typically avoid and ignore as best we can; but rather our near-obsession, attraction and repulsion to death.

Consider the ultimate culture gauge, television programming: There are the entertainment dramas like *Law & Order*, *CSI* (crime scene investigations), *ER*, etc. Then there are the reality shows like the death-defying *Survivor* sequels and *Fear Factor*. Turn instead to the "real news," and tomorrow the media circus resumes as penalty phase begins following the Scott Peterson's double-murder trial, to decide whether the state will impose death on one convicted of doing so himself.

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Last week, Bay area news film crews caught two simultaneous news stories. The first was the happy homecoming of GI's at Oakland International Airport, walking through the concourse to a spontaneous standing ovation and heroes' welcome, with two thumbs up from the traveling public bystanders. Elsewhere two flag-draped caskets were quietly and discretely offloaded from a military plane and released to two grieving families.

It made me wonder, we send our military off to war together. Why we don't bring them home together? For all our willingness to deal out death in response to death, why do we then shroud it in a cloak of secrecy, in the name of a sudden display of private respect; leaving one family or community at a time throughout our land to grieve alone?

Friday's news included a not untypical story from a Midwest town. The former high school quarterback, pictured wearing jersey #1, married his school sweetheart, then joined the Marines and went to Iraq. His first son was born last Monday, an hour before the soldier's Humvee was blown up by a roadside bomb.

In his bewilderment, the grieving father of the dead Marine first tried to smile for the cameras, offering: "One came down from up there," gesturing upwards, "another went up ... Maybe they passed each other on the way." Then his face turned grave, his voice breaking, "Now they say my son is a hero. But all I want is my son."

Death came knocking on a family's door; and a son doesn't live there anymore.

I go on and on with all this because today is "Christ the king Sunday," in the Church year. It's the last Sunday of our Pentecost season. We have completed the perennial reenactment and living remembrance of our Lord's birth, life of teaching, preaching, healing, and his death.

Next Sunday we begin again with the first Sunday of Advent season. We begin with incarnation, and will end it all once again, reading a Good Friday gospel, with Calvary, the cross and death, and a promise of Paradise. As the Colossians reading puts it, "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross."

The gospel story we read this morning is a death scene. In it the characters are tempted, taunted and tortured with death. In this account from Luke's gospel, there is the conversation of Jesus with the two guilty thieves, or murderers. One still pins his hopes on this life, the other on the next. Either way, it is a story that reeks of death, in a culture as soaked in death as ours; and – hauntingly, now for over 1,300 American soldiers – soaked in practically the very same soil.

The cross, of course, was the ultimate symbol of death, used as an instrument of execution. When Jesus is put to death on the cross, it becomes a life and death matter; not only for us, but for the One who creates life as well. It is the point and the place where it all comes together. Or, it all falls apart. It is the crossroads of faith or forsakenness. We call it the crucifix.

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When I was a boy, I remember a large crucifix, at least two feet tall, which hung on the wall of my father's study, behind his desk in our home. I would see it there looming over him while he wrote his Sunday morning sermons. (He wrote them on *Saturday* mornings, of all things, instead of my early Sunday morning scramble!)

I remember the feelings of fear and fascination, as I surveyed that gory cross, with the *corpus* hanging on it: the nails through the hands and feet, the tilted head, the drooping arms and wounded side, the expression on the face of one as good as dead. There was a kind of crucifix-ation about it all for me.

Sometime later, when I'd grown up and entered the preaching enterprise myself, my father passed on to me a small crucifix that he'd been given by an ancient woman and longtime member of my childhood parish in Kalamazoo. The wooden cross is smooth, black

ebony, and no more than six inches in height. The miniature corpus appears to be sculpted pewter, but sufficiently detailed to conjure up plenty of boyhood memories.

The little crucifix does not hang on the wall of my own home study where I write my sermons. I do, however, keep it in the desk drawer where I sit and write, as a reminder. It helps me remember my Lord once hung in death on the cross; and also, that Christ doesn't hang there anymore. The little black crucifix, tucked away in a drawer, always brings to mind for me Paul's words in his letter the Church in Rome:

What then are we to say? ... Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. ... But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.

We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.” (Romans 6)

Then Paul comes to the crux of the matter, and the matter of life and death: “The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.”

What does that mean for us? Better, what does that require of us?

“So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your selves to God as instruments of righteousness.”

The cross of Christ takes us from *crucifixation* of death to a new life in Christ. When it comes to the crucifix of this world, we don't live here anymore. It's been done, we say. In Christ, it has been done to death. Our lives then become instead the cruciform of faith, borne by the light of Christ we bear to this world: namely, that *death is not the answer to death*.

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During this year's Memorial Day observances, there was an HBO broadcast documentary recounting stories of American soldiers and their families who have recently faced the reality of death and loss; what happens when a culture's certain fascination and fixation come knocking with fear and dread.

“It was the lightest tap on my door that I've ever heard in my life,” said the mother of Specialist Holly McGeogh, a 19-year-old who was killed by a bomb in Kirkuk. “I opened the door and I seen the man in the dress greens and I knew. I immediately knew. But I thought that if, as long as I didn't let him in, he couldn't tell me. And then it — none of that would've happened. So he kept saying, ‘Ma'am, I need to come in.’ And I kept telling him, I'm sorry, but you can't come in.”

And then there's this account:

Melissa Givens was told by a chaplain that her husband, Pfc. Jesse Givens, who was 34, had drowned when his tank fell into the Euphrates River. Distraught, she insisted that the chaplain was lying. But she said that was O.K., because she would never tell anyone that he had lied. She said he could walk away and she would just forget about the whole thing. Private Givens died on May 1, 2003, the day that President Bush, on the aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln, declared that “major combat operations in Iraq have ended.”

Of course, it hasn't ended. And the older I get, the more I realize and understand that death is not only a natural part of life, but – in so much of our dueling and dealing – it has also become a fixation. When we fail to bear witness now to the emptiness of the cross, it makes a mockery of Christ's crucifixion.

I'm even old enough to remember singer/songwriter John Fogerty, and the '60's music of Creedance Clearwater Revival. A new CD recently released includes “Deja-vu, all over again.”

Did you hear 'em talkin' 'bout it on the radio
Did you try to read the writing on the wall
Did that voice inside you say I've heard it all before
It's like Deja Vu all over again

Day by day I hear the voices rising
Started with a whisper like it did before
Day by day we count the dead and dying
Ship the bodies home while the networks all keep score
One by one I see the old ghosts rising
Stumblin' 'cross Big Muddy
Where the light gets dim
Day after day another Momma's crying
She's lost her precious child
To a war that has no end
Did you hear 'em talkin' 'bout it on the radio ...
It's like DeJa Vu all over again ...

The unnerving words to a pop singer's song may indeed sound like crucifixion in a world where the "peoples of the earth" seem perpetually "divided and enslaved by death." In reply, we sing our gospel hymn (from our Hymnal #598):

Lord Christ, when first thou cam'st to earth, upon a cross they bound thee,
and mocked they saving kingship then by thorns with which they crowned thee: and still our wrongs may weave thee now
new thorns to pierce that steady brown, and robe of sorrow round thee.
O awful Love, which found no room in life where sin denied thee,
and, doomed to death, must bring to doom the powers which crucified thee,
till not a stone was left on stone, and all those nations' pride ove'rthrown,
went down to dust beside thee!
New advent of the love of Christ, shall we again refuse thee,
till in the night of hate and war we perish as we lose thee?
From old unfaith our souls release to see the kingdom of thy peace,
by which alone we choose thee.
O wounded hands of Jesus, build in us they new creation;
our pride is dust, our vaunt is stilled, we wait thy revelation:
O love that triumphs over loss, we bring our hearts before thy cross,
to finish thy salvation.

Our Lord and ruler is the one whose crucifix unloosed our fixation, and put an end to death as a way to try to live.
The good news? We don't have to keep doing this. By the cross of Christ, we don't live here anymore. Amen.

Footnote: This sermon generated a fair amount of feedback. Several folks expressed appreciation in one way or another, while at least one faithful friend not only took exception to some of these remarks, and was willing to tell me so. I value everyone's experience and input, in order to continue a dialogue of faith, as we discern together the meaning of the gospel in our lives. *jib+*