

Holy Cross Day
St. John 12:20-33

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

"So the LORD God said to the serpent: 'Because you have done this, You are cursed more than all cattle, And more than every beast of the field; On your belly you shall go, And you shall eat dust All the days of your life. And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel.'" (Genesis 3:14-15) So did YHWH curse the serpent in the Garden, and in so doing, promise salvation for Adam and the woman and all that would be born of them—for you and for all the world, dear hearers. This promised salvation will come by way of the Seed of the Woman.

After this promise, Adam called his wife Eve, for she would be the mother of all the living. She bore him a son whom they named Cain, for she had acquired a man, the LORD. (cf. Genesis 4:1) She thought her son the promised Seed, but she was mistaken as this one was conceived and born in sin and unable to crush the serpent's head. What he was able to do was kill his brother, and for that, he was cursed from the earth, a banishment similar to that of his parents. Adam knew his wife again, she conceived and bore another son, Seth, "For God has appointed another seed for me instead of Abel, whom Cain killed." (Genesis 4:25b) Still, they did not get it.

A few millennia later, a descendant of Seth would be visited by the angel Gabriel. This young maiden, betrothed but not yet married, was told that she would conceive and bear a Son and call His name Jesus. "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end." Mary wonders how this could be; she has never known a man. Gabriel said,

The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God. Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible. (Luke 1:26-37)

Finally, the promised Seed of the Woman was conceived and born. Joseph, being convinced that what was conceived in Mary was of the Holy Spirit, takes her and the Child into his home and raises the Boy as his own. But this was no ordinary Boy; this was not Joseph's Boy. This was the Son of God in the flesh, begotten by no man. This was the Seed of the Woman—Son of God and Son of Man.

A few decades later, Jesus was speaking to His disciples and certain Greeks who were in Jerusalem for the feast. He tells them, "The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified. Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain."

It's not enough that the Seed of the Woman was conceived and born. It's not enough that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. (cf. John 1:14) If all Jesus did was be born and live, He would be no Savior at all, and you would still be in your sins and not in Christ. You would have no hope—absolutely none—and God would be a liar and not one who fulfills His promises. No, the promised Seed would have to have his heel bruised as He crushed the serpent's head. Therefore, since, "[W]ithout shedding of blood there is no remission" (Hebrews 9:22b), and, Jesus' hour having come, He is making His way to Golgotha, where He would shed His blood for the remission of the sins of the world. There, on a hill called Skull, Jesus gave His life as a ransom for many; He died and was buried, and on the third day He rose again. "And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!" (1 Corinthians 15:19)

But Jesus Christ is risen, having taken your sins into His flesh and died with them. Therefore, your faith does save you, and you are not in your sins!

But this is the problem, isn't it? You like having the Seed around. You like Christmas and Easter,

but Good Friday presents you with a dark image, something you would consider negative. It's difficult to see the baby in the manger and know that He was sent to crush the serpent's head while having His heel bruised. It's saddening to see the infant of Bethlehem and know that He was sent by the Father to give His life to take away the sins of the world.

Today is Holy Cross Day. It's an interesting day on the liturgical calendar in that it is an unusual observance. On the church calendar, feast days are usually set aside to commemorate a person—a prominent figure in the history of the church—or an event, such as the Reformation. Today, however, we commemorate an object—and instrument on which the church focuses, and for a very specific reason. Now, it's also one reason why some of our sister congregations are avoiding the observance, sticking with Trinity XIII or Pentecost XIV—the cross of Christ should be a focus for every day of the church year. And it's true, too. But Holy Cross Day does give us opportunity to ask and answer a question.

What makes the cross holy?

It's a question the answer to which is related to what was heard already in this sermon. It's not enough that the Seed was born, the Son of God took on human flesh and blood and was born of a woman in order that He would shed that blood and give His flesh over to death in order that you would have eternal life. And His bodily rising from the grave is a sign and seal of this promise to you, that you are forgiven, that you are saved, and that you have eternal life, all at the expense of Jesus' death on the cross.

And that, dear hearers, is what makes the cross holy: Jesus' death upon it. It's not enough simply to have a cross. In that case, a cross is simply a cross, a device used in ancient Rome (and some other cultures) as a form of capital punishment.

A criminal would be nailed to a cross in order to die an excruciating death. A nail through each wrist—or each hand if the wrists were bound to the cross beam—to pin his upper body to the cross, and a nail through his feet, perhaps even bruising the heel, to pin his lower body to the cross. A small ledge was often placed under his feet in order that he could occasionally brace himself to take a breath. Over time, several days perhaps, the criminal would die due to suffocation or exposure (or a combination of the two), suffering much pain and torment while he slowly died. In cases where haste was required to carry out this capital punishment, the criminal's legs were broken, preventing him from being able to take a breath, but making it no less excruciating.

This, dear hearers, is what Jesus suffered for your sins. This, is what the babe in the manger, the infant of Bethlehem, the Son of God and Son of Man, the Seed of the Woman came to suffer on your behalf. For your sins, you deserve to go through what he went through—what the two criminals crucified beside Him went through, and you justly. But Jesus took your sins and your punishment from you, sparing you from that death—from eternal death—by way of His body and blood given and shed for you on His cross—the Holy Cross.

But Jesus on a cross is an offensive image. For one thing, it's painful to look upon such an image and realize that it should be you up there for your sins. No one likes being told that they are a sinner. Consequently, no one likes being told that Jesus died on a cross for their sins. "I can do perfectly good on my own," they think, "I don't need a Savior to die for me." But, if Cain was unable to be the Savior on account of His sins, then no one, you included, is capable of atoning for their sins.

For another thing, the image of Jesus on a cross is offensive because it is a reminder of His death, and as we all know and confess, Jesus is no longer on the cross, but risen from the grave. Therefore, some may say that an empty cross is a better image for a resurrected Jesus. You can counter that an empty grave is the better image for a resurrected Jesus. As one author put it, saying that we worship a resurrected Jesus, not a dead Jesus, misses the mark.

The biblical truth is that we worship Christ who was both crucified and resurrected. We must be careful not to downplay the Crucifixion, for it

won forgiveness and salvation for us; the Resurrection won us eternal life. Both are true, and both are necessary. (unknown author)

Jesus was raised from the tomb, not the cross; therefore, a bare cross cannot be a symbol of the resurrection any more than an empty manger can be. We know that Jesus did not remain on the cross, but neither did He remain in the manger or in the tomb, but you confess that He was in all three of those places for you, and so we can rightly have images of him in all three of those places.

Sadly, American pietism and Protestantism have replaced crucifixes with bare crosses. And while Christians can view the cross and understand what it means, a bare cross does not clearly proclaim Jesus Christ and Him crucified. It used to be that American Lutheran churches continued to age-old Lutheran tradition of having crucifixes, but bowing to the urges of modern pietism and the pressure to “fit in” with Protestant churches, those crucifixes were replaced with bare crosses and new buildings were built with bare crosses. Such urges and pressures did away with other salutary practices, uses, and traditions, such as vestments, chalices, making the sign of the cross, and the use of the liturgy.

But we preach Christ crucified, to the pietists a stumbling block and to the Protestants foolishness (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:23), “but to those who are called...Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.” (1 Corinthians 1:24-25) We stand with St. Paul, who wrote, “For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” (1 Corinthians 2:2) One of the ways we can do that is to observe the Holy Cross, both the day as well as the image—the crucifix.

As Jesus said, “[A]s Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” (John 3:14-16) Jesus said this, pointing back to what you heard in today’s Old Testament lesson (cf. Numbers 21:4-9), to signify by what death He would die. Therefore, He also closes today’s Gospel by saying,

“Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save Me from this hour’? But for this purpose I came to this hour. Father, glorify Your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, saying, “I have both glorified it and will glorify it again.” Therefore the people who stood by and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, “An angel has spoken to Him.” Jesus answered and said, “This voice did not come because of Me, but for your sake. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.

Jesus, Himself, points you to His crucifixion where He draws you and all people to Himself. For there, He was lifted up, like the bronze serpent in the wilderness, where He has taken your sin and sins into His flesh and given His life for your ransom. You look upon Him, therefore—receive Jesus Christ and Him crucified by faith in Word and Sacrament—and live!

That’s why, on this Holy Cross Day and every Lord’s Day—for every day that God gives us breath—Jesus Christ and Him crucified is proclaimed in our churches. When His incarnation and birth are celebrated, we preach Jesus Christ crucified. When His resurrection is heralded, we preach Jesus Christ crucified. When we rejoice as His ascension, we preach Jesus Christ crucified. Jesus Christ died on the cross outside of Jerusalem, the Sacrifice for your sins, and into His death and resurrection you have been baptized. You have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer you who live, but Christ lives in you; and the life which you now live in the flesh you live by faith in the Son of God, who loved you and gave Himself for you. (cf. Galatians 2:20) And since Jesus gave Himself for you, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.