

Why He Died

John 1:10-18

A sermon for the Second Sunday after Christmas (Series C)

John 1:14: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" In translating this verse, scholars had a real difficulty. If you were to translate it literally, it says: "The word became flesh and tented among us." That's not idiomatic English. But those who first heard this in the original language knew exactly what was meant. It refers to that Old Testament story of the Tabernacle and how God's people were led by the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. That's how God was with them and guarded them and led them.

John 1:4-5 says there was the darkness but the light came, and although the darkness tried, it couldn't overcome the light. The same thing is true in John 3:19: "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil."

Then John 1:18 states: "No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known." The Word is that which makes him known. The one who comes as the Word is the one who tells us who the Father is. The Word is the Revealer.

In John 2:19 Jesus says: "Destroy this temple and in three days I will build it up." They were absolutely confused. What was he talking about? He was talking about himself.

John 3:11 says the Son will be lifted up as the serpent was in the wilderness. They all knew how in the wilderness Moses had made a brass serpent or snake on the top of a long pole, and when the people who were sick looked up to the snake, they were healed. John 1:29 reflects this saving image: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

All of these references describe how God was working for our salvation. F. W. Dillistone in his famous book, *The Doctrine of the Atonement*, wrote that there are at least twenty different images in the New Testament describing how God is working for our salvation. Why did God do it? How did God do it? Here are five of them:

Redemption. Picture a slave auction and the sinner as slave. The Lord comes to buy the slave and then the Lord frees him (Matt 20:28; Mk 10:45, cp. Isaiah 53:10). This image falters, however, over the question: To whom is the ransom paid? Satan? God?

Justification. Picture a court of law. You stand there guilty. But the judge, the Lord, declares you not guilty for Christ's sake, and you are set free (Rom 3:21). This striking image falters over its apparent lack of concern for justice as well as over its ambiguity over how God is both prosecutor and defense attorney for the sinner.

Reconciliation. Picture two people fighting, but then they reconcile and their fighting ends. They reconcile themselves with one another (Eph 2:16, Col 1:20). But reconciliation implies that we can and should get right with God, when in fact we are totally lost in sin, and he rescues us in spite of ourselves.

Sacrifice. Picture an ancient religious ceremony in which a lamb is killed to appease a righteous God (Hebrews 9:22). The problem with this horrific image is that it implies that God needs to be bought off and can be bought off by the death of Christ, when in truth, God in Christ died to do mercy to us.

Victory. Picture the conquering victor of a war against a terrible evil (Lk 10:18, 20:43; Philippians 2:11). This glorious image, however, is unclear about who or what is defeated by the cross.

It's not only in the Bible that we find such pictures or images of what God is doing and why. Some pictures arise from tradition and popular culture. For example, the poem, "Footprints in The Sand" is well known today. In the poem someone dreams he is walking along the beach with the Lord, looking back on his life. In most situations he noticed two footprints in the sand. One belonging to him and the other to the Lord. But at his lowest and saddest times there was only one set of footprints. He asked the Lord about this and the Lord answered: I am always with you but in the hardest times of your life, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I was carrying you. This poem has an appeal, but many problems, too. It's sentimental and lacks concern for sin, death, and the devil. It's not about Christ and him crucified for the ungodly, that is, for us.

Even outsiders have made claims about how God is working. Back in the early 1900's one novelist, James Branch Cabell, fantasized that the world is a figment of God's imagination, and that behind this God is another God imaging everything, and that behind that God is another God, etc.

Why couldn't God just snap his fingers, so to speak, and make everything right? Why did he do it according to the Biblical account?

F. W. Dillistone finally throws up his hands and says: No one can sort this out! The best we can do is play Bach's B Minor Mass or sing Negro Spirituals.

What's really at stake is that we buy into the mistaken idea that salvation is about caring. Or about "doing good things," so we give our communities a good impression of us.

For many people in our culture today, God is a great Santa Claus. People think that's what God has to be like. A fatherly figure who does good things for us. It really doesn't matter what you've done, but it's better to be good.

We remind ourselves of the hard truth that our minds are idol-making machines. We like sentimental images. We like to think well of ourselves. We try to get away from the fact that there is a problem. The terrible problem is: We are caught in sin and death, and there's nothing that can be done about it.

Inwardly we rebel, thinking salvation is this way or that way, always trying to get around the fact that the only way that this is properly and definitively described is through the cross. The cross is the controlling way of thinking about this. That's why Paul writes in 1 Cor 1:22-25:

“For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”

In this case, we're the Greeks. In our wisdom we try to imagine it has to be our way. That's how God is, and that's how he has to be because that's the way we decided it just has to be.

What is this cross about? The cross controls and defines what salvation is about. It's about three things:

First of all, there's a problem that is only seen properly by God; it is that we are lost and caught by sin, death, and the devil.

In the second place, God handles it his way. It's not our way. It's his way through the cross.

In the third place, it's handled. The cross tells us what sin is. It points out that sin is the continuing attempt we make to manage God our way. We presume we can manage him because he is the Great Santa Claus. The one who winks and pats us on the head no matter what. That's the problem: We think we can figure it out, and then we have a way of controlling God.

And the message of the Gospel is: In this foolishness of ours, in this helplessness and hopelessness, God has done this his way, and that's the message that Christmas and Easter give us. He has done it. And we can rejoice in it.

Concretely here and now it means two things for you and me. First, it means that the real problem we have is sin. The real problem is that we keep thinking that we've got it figured out. We figure it's going to be our way. We can do it that way, and that's what it's about, instead of what the Lord says: It's through the cross and resurrection in Jesus Christ.

The second thing it means here and now for you and me that there is that which is grace and truth and glory, awe and wonder, the amazing nature of what God is doing. He gives us a holy dis-ease, not disease, but a dis-ease because he throws us off all the ways that we are self-centered. He has done it, and it is in his doing that we can rejoice. Amen