

**Altavista Presbyterian Church
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**“The Apostles’ Creed,
Part IV”
Isaiah 53:4-9
I Peter 4:12-19**

**Fifth Sunday of Easter
April 29, 2018**

Isaiah 53:4-9

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—everyone—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

I Peter 4:12-19

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And "If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?" Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

"The Apostles' Creed, Part IV"

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

This morning we will continue in our sermon series on the Apostles' Creed. We are nearing the halfway-point of this series and before we dive into today's article, I wanted to state a reminder concerning the purpose of this series. The Apostles' Creed is something we recite every week. So much so, that for many of you it has been memorized since childhood. Notice I said "you." While I do have the Creed committed to memory now, it was not something I grew up with. In my youth, when asked to confess my faith — or as they called it "give a testimony" — I often struggled with finding the right words. There's a lot about faith and life and doctrine that my young mind found difficult to comprehend. When I discovered the Apostles' Creed, I discovered a liberating force. In the Apostles' Creed I found the words that expressed by faith. But since it was something I did not grow up with, it took study on my part. It took an effort for me to learn what it is the Apostles' Creed is saying. What does it mean to believe in God the Father almighty? What does it mean to believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord? This sermon series came out of a desire to give

testimony to the faith of the historic church. I find comfort and hope in attaching my faith to that of the ancients' — a faith tried against the annals of history. My hope is that you, too, may find comfort and strength in the words of the Apostles' Creed.

So now, let us answer the question, What does it mean to believe Jesus *suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried*? The suffering of Christ is at the core of classical Christianity. The fact that the Apostles' Creed jumps from an affirmation of the birth of Christ to a confession of his passion is not an accident. The purpose is to bring into sharp focus the events of Jesus' death. This is not to say that Jesus' life was unimportant for the authors of this creed. Quite the contrary. The ancient church knew and understood the immense importance of Jesus' life of obedience in the grand plan of salvation. In fact, Jesus' death was the culmination and fruition of his life and teachings. His suffering, then, is just as much part of his mission as his teaching and life example. Moreover, Jesus himself expressed a certain compulsion to "drink the cup" that the Father set before him. He said the Son of Man *must* suffer many things. He set his face resolutely toward Jerusalem. He assumed the role of the Suffering Servant of Israel who acquainted himself with grief and fully entered into the human predicament.

This is the very thing we proclaim when we confess the incarnation. That God, the Father almighty, emptied himself, or as Calvin likes to say, God condescended to our level to acquaint himself with our humanity. This condescension and suffering was done for our benefit. As Paul says elsewhere, by one man, Adam, sin entered the world, and therefore by another man, Jesus, redemption can be had by all. Suffering, then, was not something left to Jesus and ignored by his followers. Indeed, the opposite is true. As we've seen in Bible study, the Apostles saw reflected in their own suffering and the suffering of their compatriots the same suffering that Christ undertook on their behalf. Suffering, for the early church, was not something to flee from nor something to rationalize nor something to find masochistic enjoyment in. The consolation of the early church involves not a denial of suffering, but a victory over it. This is what Peter is getting at when he says, "If anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name." To confess a faith in Jesus Christ *who suffered*, we are confessing that in Christ redemption from ultimate suffering is accomplished through suffering. That is to say, the turmoil of the Christian is but a paper cut when compared to the torments of hell.

The Apostles' Creed includes a modifier to Jesus' suffering, which was done *under Pontius Pilate*. Of all the historical personages that surround Jesus' passion, why was Pilate given special consideration by the creed? In selecting Pilate, the authors of the creed were not lifting the guilt off the shoulders of Judas, Caiaphas, Herod, and the many other participants in Jesus' crucifixion. Rather, the authors selected Pilate because of his unique function in the historical unfolding of the covenant. You see, Pilate represents the legal authority of the gentile world. And if you remember our study on the atonement, you'll recall that Jesus plays the role of the scapegoat modeled on the day of atonement. The scapegoat, after being burdened with the sins of the people, is cast out into the wilderness, or banished from camp. Jesus, as the ultimate scapegoat, has to be tried and judged "outside of the camp" and "delivered to the Gentiles," carrying with him the burden of our sin. By confessing that Jesus suffered *under Pontius Pilate* we confess that Jesus became the scapegoat for our transgressions and ultimately for our redemption.

This Jesus, whom we confess suffered, *was crucified*. The symbol of the cross has been virtually universal throughout Christian history. We see depictions of it in various forms from the earliest decades of the church and even into the furthest reaches of Christendom. Yet, the meaning of the cross has not been so universal. Today, we gladly wear the cross around our necks or on our lapels. We display it on our bumpers, in our front lawns, and even tattooed on the body. We wouldn't think twice about buying a rustic or Celtic cross as a wall hanging. But how many of you would hang on your walls an artistic rendition of an electric chair? How many of you would wear gold-plated gallows? Or proudly display a firing squad? Not only would that cause quite a scandal, you'd likely be taken into custody to be examined for mental stability. It's madness to lift up in adoration any form of execution, yet that's exactly what the Christian does when she kneels at the foot of the cross in prayer.

Why is it that the cross, a gruesome implement of death, not only adorns the physical church, but is also at the center of our worship space? The reason is because it is such a gruesome implement of death. To locate the answer we must first locate the cross within the framework of the redemptive history of Israel. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul quotes a section from Deuteronomy, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'" The cross is so central to our faith because it represents the curse that burdens our race. When we think of curses today, some may think of words you don't say around your grandmother. Others may think of voodoo witch doctors and their magical hexes. The biblical concept of the curse is very different. In our Bible study course on Genesis, we looked at how from the very beginning, God was relating to his people by way of a covenant. There, God told Adam and Eve that they could eat of any fruit in the garden and live in communion with God. But if they ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, then they should surely die. At its core, a covenant is a simple if-then statement. If you do these things, then everything will be well. If you don't do these things or if you do things contrary, then everything will not be well. Put another way, if you do good, then you will be blessed. If you do bad, then you will be cursed. And as we all know, our ancestors did bad, and from thence on, we have all been cursed with the judgment of death and separation from the presence of God.

On the cross, Jesus was cursed. As Lamb of God, the sin-bearer, he was cut off from the presence of God. On the cross, Jesus entered into the experience of forsakenness on our behalf. The crucifixion of Jesus highlights not only the ghastly and tortuous passion of Christ, but also the severing of the relationship between the Incarnate Word and God the Father. The cross is so central to our faith because it represents the curse that rightfully belongs on our shoulders but was carried by Christ in our stead. We heard Ron read the prophecy of the Suffering Servant from Isaiah. Jesus is that Suffering Servant and the cross is the vehicle through which the curse is transferred and by which we receive his benefits. The New Testament portrait of Jesus as the Incarnate One portrays him as the Suffering Servant acting in history to bring about cosmic redemption. This is the very basis of the atonement and the very thing we believe when we confess that Jesus *was crucified*.

If the cross is the vehicle of the curse, then Jesus' death is the manifestation of the curse. Therefore, we confess that not only was he crucified, but was *dead*. Jesus died. Jesus had to die. Remember the covenant from Genesis 2: "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, *for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.*" It is by God's grace and grace alone that Adam and Eve did not succumb to death

immediately, for indeed that was the rightful and just response for breaking the terms and conditions. Paul, too, reminds us that the wages of sin is death. The just and fair judgment of God toward sinning is death. *Once* we grasp the gravity of sin and its destructive power, *then* we may gain a better insight into the grace and steadfast love of God. God doesn't have to be gracious toward us. But because he loves us, his "very good" creation, he stays death's hand and allows us many, many opportunities for reconciliation. These opportunities at righting our relationship with God are only afforded us because Jesus died. In death, he received judgement — my judgement, your judgement. The One who was fully obedient was stricken with the judgment of the disobedient. The judgment of the first Adam was transferred to the second Adam. And the life of the second Adam was given up so that the descendants of the first Adam might have eternal life. Because of Christ, when a Christian dies that death is no longer a payment for sin, but rather is a transfer from sin into life everlasting.

And now we reach the turning point of the Apostles' Creed. Up to this point the creed has taken us down and down to a moment of utter despair culminating in the death of Jesus Christ. But now, ironically, the tide changes when he was *buried*. Jesus' burial has far more significance than we usually give it during Easter. Once Jesus died, a well-to-do and secret disciple, Joseph of Arimathea, took Jesus' body and buried him in a tomb. This is truly extraordinary for those gathered on that fateful day. Jesus was considered by many to be a common criminal, so much so he was executed as one. Yet, this burial stands in sharp contrast to the customary procedures of the day in disposing of the bodies of executed criminals. Jesus' body was not dumped unceremoniously, but was treated with honor and respect. In life, the Son of God received no great honor from the religious elite. In those final moments of his ignominy, he was even abandoned by his own disciples. And Jesus himself said, "the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." But in death, he received a burial of dignity befitting a leader of Israel. In death, he was given a luxurious resting place fit for a king. When we confess that Jesus was *dead and buried*, we are confessing to the end of his humiliation and the beginning of his exultation.

Next up is a startling phrase for that many has stirred not a few controversies. What does it mean *he descended into hell*? To find out, you'll have to join us next week. For now, let us pray. Covenant God, every day we ought to ask for your forgiveness, for every day we sin against you. Forgive us for our sins of pride, selfishness, idolatry, and distrust. We know that the wage of our sins is death, and that because of our sins we shall surely die. But we are not dismayed, for as your children, you have ordained for us a pathway to eternal life. That path is covered by the blood of Christ. In his suffering, crucifixion, and death, the punishment of our sins was cast on his shoulders. He and he alone could bear the heavy weight of each of our crosses. We are not dismayed because we know that death has lost its sting and when we suffer and eventually die, we know we will join our Lord in eternal glory. Amen.