



THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON - April 5, 2009

The Big Draw

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Mark 15:31-39 (NIV)

³¹In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself!" ³²Let this Christ^a, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe." Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

The Death of Jesus

³³At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour. ³⁴And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"—which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"^b

³⁵When some of those standing near heard this, they said, "Listen, he's calling Elijah."

³⁶One man ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down," he said.

³⁷With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.

³⁸The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

³⁹And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son^d of God!"

Romans 16:1-16 (NIV)

Personal Greetings

¹I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant^e of the church in Cenchrea. ²I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me. ³Greet Priscilla^f and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. ⁴They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the

^a Or Messiah

^b Psalm 22:1

^c Some manuscripts do not have heard his cry and.

^d Or a son

^e Or deaconess

^f Greek Prisca, a variant of Priscilla

Gentiles are grateful to them. ⁵Greet also the church that meets at their house. Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia. ⁶Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you. ⁷Greet Andronicus and Junias, my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. ⁸Greet Ampliatus, whom I love in the Lord. ⁹Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my dear friend Stachys. ¹⁰Greet Apelles, tested and approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus. ¹¹Greet Herodion, my relative. Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord. ¹²Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord. Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord. ¹³Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too. ¹⁴Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the brothers with them. ¹⁵Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas and all the saints with them. ¹⁶Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ send greetings.

John 12:12-16

The Triumphal Entry

¹²The next day the great crowd that had come for the Feast heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. ¹³They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna^g" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"^h "Blessed is the King of Israel!" ¹⁴Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it, as it is written, ¹⁵"Do not be afraid, O Daughter of Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt."ⁱ

¹⁶At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him.

²⁷"Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. ²⁸Father, glorify your name!"

^g A Hebrew expression meaning "Save!" which became an exclamation of praise

^h Psalm 118:25, 26

ⁱ Zech. 9:9

Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again."²⁹ The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him.

³⁰Jesus said, "This voice was for your benefit, not mine. ³¹Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. ³²But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself."³³ He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.

I

Last October, I taught a class preachers rarely teach. "Why I am a Christian" was its title. It's that ministers so rarely go straight to this question, but somehow we don't.

But Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens and a few others have lately been on a rampage, shouting to the world that we would all be better off if we did away with religion altogether. Their books have titles like "The God Delusion," "The End of Faith," and my personal favorite: "God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything."

These critics raise the question: in light of 9/11 and all the wars throughout history waged because of religion and abortion clinics bombed and inquisitions prosecuted and crusades brutally fought – given the sheer wreckage religion has left in its wake, why believe? Why have faith? And so I put together a class.

II

Why am I a Christian? Paul has a clear answer to this question. Many of you have spent the last eight weeks walking through Paul's Letter to the Romans together in small groups. And you may remember that Paul began that letter with a bold claim. "I am not ashamed of the Gospel," he writes, "because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith – to the Jew first, but also to the Greek."

In other words, Paul says, "My good news is worth my time and yours, because God didn't just save me. God offers salvation to **everyone!**"

Every age has its prejudices and exclusions. When the great African-American writer Toni Morrison was working on her novel, *Paradise*, she read Dante and Milton and all the great authors who picture heaven

and hell; and she discovered that they shared three common traits. Through all that literature, she found three distinct strands of commonality: community, eternity, and **exclusion**. "You and me, together forever, **without them.**"

In a species bent on exclusion, that word **everyone** is a shocking one. In Paul's day it was shocking **ethnically**. God had thrown the doors wide open. It wasn't just Jews who could be a part of this Jesus thing. Suddenly God's love had broken through and blown down the barriers and invited **all peoples** into the party. "To the Jew first, but also to the Greek."

For you and me the **everyone** probably shocks in other ways, too. Maybe this morning **everyone** shocks us **politically**: "to the Republican first, but also to the Democrat." Or maybe the **everyone** jolts us **denominationally**: "to the Catholic first, but also to the Protestant; to the Mainliner first, but also to the Fundamentalist." Substitute your own form of exclusion. Each of us has one. So Paul's **everyone** shocks us, too.

Whatever our brand of exclusion may be, Paul things God has blown it up out of love. And the next fifteen chapters of Romans tell how that revolutionary love of God works. Paul realizes that for a long time he has misunderstood God. For all his life Paul had thought that a person got "**righteous**" by doing right things. You look at the Law of Moses, you try to do everything in it. The more you do, the more God likes you. You pull yourself up to God, like climbing a rope, one strenuous law at a time. Everyone tries. The strongest make it.

But on a road from Jerusalem to Damascus, Paul discovered that he had been terribly wrong all along. Life with God is not an episode of Survivor. In Jesus, God extends a loving hand to ALL people, no matter who we are or what we've done. All we have to do is grab that divine hand and hold on. That grabbing and holding is called **faith**. "I am not ashamed of the Gospel," says Paul, "because it is the power of God for salvation for **everyone** who has faith."

III

Mark is like the mystery novelist who describes the crime at the start and then spends a whole book telling

how it got solved. So in Mark 1.1, we read the answer to a riddle: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Then throughout fourteen chapters Jesus does what a Son of God does.

- He teaches;
- He heals;
- He loves His disciples
- And He loves people no one else loves.

There are a lot of astonishing miracles. Here he changes a little bread into a big banquet. There he brings a dead girl back to life. But you know, throughout all those beautiful stories, not a single person around Jesus ever connects the dots and solves the mystery!

A **huge** storm rises at sea, and with one word, Jesus calms it. The disciples ask the question: “Even wind and waves obey him! Who is this guy?!” But they have no answer.

We might have expected the religious experts to figure it out. They know scripture like the back of their hand. But none of them do.

We might have thought one of the disciples would solve the riddle. They’ve lived with Jesus day and night for years. But none of them get it either.

But then comes this morning’s reading. There’s this Roman soldier, standing, doing his job on that horrid Calvary hill. And when he looks up to confirm Jesus’ death, he notices that it’s different than any death he’s ever seen. He’s seen thousands of these. He is a professional executioner. But Mark tells us, “When the Centurion saw how Jesus died, he said, “surely this man was the Son of God.”

From miracles and brilliant teaching no one got it. But a Gentile Roman soldier from the death squad watches a Jewish rabble-rouser breathe his last breath and he suddenly knows. **This isn’t just the end of a life. This is the reaching hand of God.**

“I am not ashamed of the Gospel,” writes Paul, “for it is the power of God for salvation to **everyone** who has faith.”

IV

Here’s where it gets personal.

I told you about that class I taught last fall, “Why I am a Christian.” I had a simple plan: Four weeks. Four Topics.

Week One: Read the Atheists’ case against Christianity.

Week Two: Survey Christian answers to critics.

Week Three: Ask the group what obstacles stand between them and faith.

Week Four: Describe my brand of Biblical Christianity.

You may notice that nowhere in that outline do I ever really have to tell anyone Why I Am a Christian. And I thought I could get away with it my sneaky plan. But these are smart people like you are, so they saw through it.

Week Two, from the back of the room: “So Allen, why ARE you a Christian?”

“Um. Er. I’ll tell you next week.”

Week Three from the left side: “Allen, why are YOU a Christian?”

“Next lesson!”

Week Four from front and center: “Allen, WHY ARE YOU A CHRISTIAN?”

And I couldn’t dodge it anymore.

So I told them it was partly GEOGRAPHICAL. I was born in Northeastern Montana rather than Burma. I grew up in a town of 2,000 people and 20 churches, from Catholic to Baptist to Methodist to Mennonite.. The chance of someone from Sheridan, Oregon embracing Islam or Judaism or Buddhism were pretty low.

And I told them it was partly SOCIAL AND CULTURAL. I fell in with a Christian crowd. In sixth grade, I knew Joe Hoover. He was my best friend. And Joe Hoover had faith. I kind of caught it from him. Then he and I had a lot of other people around us who had faith. They helped us keep it.

And, you know, as true as those explanations are, that class wasn't buying it. They kept pressing: "There's got to be more."

I hemmed and hawed and gave some intellectual defenses of Christianity. But they wouldn't let it go, and what came out next wasn't in my notes.

"I WEEP!" said I. "I'm not really a crier. But I notice that at certain things, I WEEP."

"MLK knows the bullet is coming, but the cause of justice is right, so he keeps walking."

"I weep."

"The single mother works three jobs that bleed the lifeblood out of her because she wants her kid to get to college."

"I weep."

"Friends, someone commits an act of extreme self-sacrifice, and I'm a blubbing fool."

Words were flowing more easily now.

"I weep."

"The first black students ever walk cross the threshold of a Little Rock school, books in hand."

"I weep."

"The twelve-year-old girl takes a moment to look outside her circle. She finds the girl who's never invited in and has lunch."

"I weep."

"Somebody blows open the doors with radical inclusion, and I weep."

Friends, on this Passion Sunday '09, I think that's why I'm a Christian. In an age of religious wars that splash blood across our newspapers and dim our hope, Jesus gave himself up spread-eagle on that cross.

In an age of exclusion and strife that rip communities and lives apart, Jesus became the hand of God reaching to EVERYONE, EVERYWHERE.

Self-Sacrifice and Inclusion.

There's no place in all of history where they are more vividly displayed than in the life and death of Jesus. When I see them today, they draw me to that long-ago day, to that gruesome hill, to that hideous cross.

Self-Sacrifice and Inclusion.

They move in my soul.

That's why I'm a Christian.

Maybe that's why you're a Christian too.

Jesus said, "If I am lifted up from the earth on a cross, I will draw all people to myself." **Amen.**