



# THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – February 14, 2010

“Who is Jesus? The Crucified Messiah”  
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## Mark 15:25-39

<sup>25</sup>It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. <sup>26</sup>The inscription of the charge against him read, 'The King of the Jews.' <sup>27</sup>And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left. <sup>29</sup>Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, <sup>30</sup>save yourself, and come down from the cross!' <sup>31</sup>In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. <sup>32</sup>Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.' Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

### The Death of Jesus

<sup>33</sup>When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. <sup>34</sup>At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' <sup>35</sup>When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'Listen, he is calling for Elijah.' <sup>36</sup>And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.' <sup>37</sup>Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. <sup>38</sup>And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. <sup>39</sup>Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'

## Romans 8:31-39

### God's Love in Christ Jesus

<sup>31</sup>What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? <sup>32</sup>He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? <sup>33</sup>Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup>Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. <sup>35</sup>Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? <sup>36</sup>As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.' <sup>37</sup>No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup>For I am convinced that neither death, nor

*life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup>nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

### I.

I want to start with an illustration that is a good deal more sensational than the rest of the sermon.

Former Senator John Edwards has been in the news a great deal lately, not alas because of his political convictions but because of his marital troubles. And the word used to describe his situation in story after story is the single word: scandal.

His behavior has been a scandal for those who were devoted to him, who followed his political career, because it has been deeply disappointing. Not at all what they had expected or hoped.

And his behavior has been a scandal for those who opposed him, because it has been sadly satisfying. It opens the opportunity for criticism, mockery, ridicule.

The apostle Paul says that the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is a scandal. In our time that's hard for us to understand because as Christians we quite rightly sing: "In the cross of Christ I glory" cross" or "Lift high the cross!" How can this be a scandal?

But think yourselves back to first century Palestine.

Suppose you had decided to follow Jesus, believing that he was the promised Messiah. And it's looking pretty good: very wise teachings, astonishing miracles, a triumphal march into Jerusalem, and then within the course of a few days, terrible reversal. Jesus arrested; Jesus convicted; Jesus – the Messiah – hung on a cross. He wasn't hung on the cross like an ordinary criminal. That's much too easy. He was hung on the cross AS an ordinary criminal. Judged and convicted.

Not at all what we had expected or hoped.

Or suppose you'd been opposed to Jesus from the beginning, suspicious of his pretensions and doubtful of his power. Now his conviction becomes sadly satisfying. Just what you always expected: "Some Messiah this is!"

You can understand why the passersby wag their heads at him and say: "You saved others; you can't save yourself."

You can understand why Saul of Tarsus, that outstanding citizen, could hardly stand the fact that some of his community were actually still trying to defend this crook.

You can understand why he sets out to prosecute those annoying Christians, to make them pay for their shameful allegiances.

Because the whole thing is a scandal.

## II.

Early Christians knew it was a scandal. All the gospel writers knew it was a scandal. Saul, who astonishingly turned into Paul and joined the church he had persecuted – he knew it was a scandal, too.

But there it was. So they ended up believing two scandalous things.

Thing number one: Jesus is Messiah, God's own son.

Thing number two: Jesus was crucified as an outlaw.

Then they prayed and thought and searched scripture and tried to find a way to talk about how both those things could be true at once.

And because that claim – that Jesus is not only the Messiah, he's the crucified Messiah – is so enormous and so scandalous no one from that day until this could come up with a perfect explanation. What they came up with is what Professor David Tracy of the University of Chicago calls "fragments."

Put all the fragments together and you may have something of great beauty, like a stained glass window or a Byzantine mosaic.

By themselves they always, only, give us part of the picture.

## III.

Here are two fragments – one from Mark's Gospel and one from Paul's letter to the Romans – that give us a piece of the picture – a step or two toward understanding, a step or two toward faith.

In Mark's Gospel, more than any of our other gospels, the scandal of the cross is absolutely clear. It is clear not only that Jesus suffers but that he suffers in such pain and such disgrace that he cries out to God, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me."

Luke takes the same story, Jesus on the cross, and he knows that Mark's telling of the story is scandalous. So in Luke's Gospel instead of crying in anguish: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me," Jesus speaks out in fidelity: "Into your hands, O God, I commit my spirit."

But Mark's fragment is an essential piece of our faith. There is a verse from a hymn we used to sing in the Baptist church; "Jesus knows our every weakness."

What Mark tells us is that Jesus knows human experience at our best and at our worst, when we are most comforted and when we are without comfort.

What Mark tells us is that in Jesus Christ God enters into every human experience. In Jesus Christ God even knows what it is to feel the absence of God.

It's a fragment. I know that. One fragment tells us that sometimes God relieves suffering. And that's true. There are other fragments that talk about our relationship to God. One fragment tells us that God blesses us abundantly; and that's true. One fragment says that in Christ God shares our burdens and suffers our losses. That's Mark's truth.

Joseph Lowery followed Martin Luther King, Jr. as the president of the Southern Christian Leadership conference. Lowery is a retired pastor in Atlanta and I heard him talk one time about his dismay at the so-called prosperity churches that are not only springing up in Atlanta, they're growing, flourishing.

The prosperity churches seem to say that what God is up to in the world is to make everything all right. Making everything all right means clearing up every problem, and healing every illness, and finally improving everybody's life style.

And Lowery wonders: Where in all that is the cross? Where is the God who suffers with our suffering?

We all know, these are my words and not Lowery's; we all know that sometimes the faithful don't get blessed, sometimes we get bludgeoned.

Lowery's friend and colleague Martin Luther King, Jr. prayed during one of the hardest times of his life that God would take the pain away, and the only assurance he got was that God would be there in the pain as well.

#### IV.

And that brings us to the other fragment for this morning. Now it's not Mark, it's Paul who believed that the cross was such a scandal until he learned that the scandal was also a gift.

When he was still Saul he had believed that the cross was the proof that God did not love Jesus. But when he became Paul, when he became an apostle, he discovered that the cross was the proof that God does love us.

Those arms outstretched on the cross, Paul says, those arms are of course the arms of the man Jesus, but they are also the very arms of God, embracing us, holding us, claiming us for God's own.

Mark shows us Jesus on the cross crying out in separation from God. Paul shows us Jesus and says that God reaches out in that same cross to end the separation. In life and in death, in triumph and in suffering, in health and in sickness, claiming us for God's own.

"For I am persuaded..." says Paul, and he's looking straight at the cross. "For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

#### V.

We stand before mystery now. We try to discover not just what any one of us believes, least of all what I believe, but what the church seeks to believe, century after century.

We talk in fragments. Mark's fragment about an abandoned Messiah. Paul's fragment about the God who does not let us go.

Here is another fragment to help us see those fragments, that portion of the whole.

Nicholas Gage is an American journalist who was born in Greece during World War II. At the end of World War II the communists took over Greece and they set to work to eradicate democracy and any who supported democracy.

Nicholas has written a book called *Eleni*. Eleni was Gage's mother. She and Gage's father decided that the only way to provide safety for their children was to smuggle them out of Greece to the United States.

So the father went first to establish a home, and then one by one Eleni made arrangements to smuggle her children out of Greece to their new home in the United States.

But just after the last of the children had been sent safely away, a neighbor who knew what Eleni had been doing, reported her to the Communist authorities.

And they arrested her, and tried her, and found her guilty, and took her to a hill outside the village where a firing squad awaited her.

When they got to the top of the hill, Eleni said one last thing: "My children!" she cried, sad, defiant.

And then they fired.

On his own hill, Jesus, arms outstretched, crying to God, claiming us for God. "My children."

For I am persuaded that neither life, nor death, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

To Christ be thanks and praise. **Amen.**