

## **HOW DID A HECK OF A NICE GUY LIKE HIM END UP IN A HELL OF A PLACE LIKE THAT?**

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Genesis 4:1-15, Matthew 27:28-37

Baptisms are getting harder for me to do, emotionally speaking. A short time ago, I was carrying one of the infants, newly baptized, down the aisle with about five other babies trailing behind in the arms of parents walking awkwardly in tow.

I was heading back up the aisle when I came to the words that I say, that “for the sake of these little ones Jesus Christ faced a lonely hill outside Jerusalem’s wall and died a terrible death, but for the sake of these little ones, three days later he rose triumphant from the grave.” I had to pause there. I had to stop and catch my breath for just a moment.

I realized two things simultaneously. First, at a personal level I realized that this was going to be not the last baptism I would perform here as these children’s and their family’s pastor, but it was *among* the last. And the other thing that struck me was the power of the words that I had just spoken.

It’s that part of the baptismal liturgy that announces, “God frees us from sin and death, uniting us with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection.” And somehow as never before those words pierced my heart. Maybe it was the fact that seventeen children had died a terrible death in the week before at the hands of someone who was possessed by demons (how else would you put it?). Maybe it was the fact that here are these little ones totally dependent on us, completely trusting in our love and care, while at the same time none of us can keep the world from happening to the ones we love no matter how much we love them nor how much we try to protect and shield them from what the world does to us all.

Over the years I’ve quoted Fred Buechner a lot, and so I guess you and I and he have become friends. In one of the passages that I keep returning to he writes about the pain a parent feels for a child.

To love another [he says] as you love a child, is to become vulnerable in a whole new way. It is no longer only through what happens to yourself that the world can hurt you but through what happens to the one you love also, and greatly more hurtfully. ...when it comes to the hurt of a child you love you are almost helpless. ...There is no way to make [her] strong with such strengths as you may have found through your own hurt, or wise through such wisdom, and even if it were, it would be the wrong way because it would be your way, not [hers]. The child’s pain becomes your pain, and as the innocent bystander, maybe it’s a worse pain for you...<sup>1</sup>

“In baptism we are united with Christ in his death and resurrection,” or so the words of the liturgy of baptism tell us. But what does that mean? And how are we united with him in death and in resurrection? It’s a good question for these early Lenten days which are leading us inexorably to a lonely hill outside Jerusalem’s wall.

With our sentimentalism about baptism, it has devolved to a social and family occasion, brunch together, grandma’s baptismal gown saved for just this day, maybe even a drop or two of Jordan River water bought at some tourist shop on the roadside near the Jordan - it’s hard to link what we have done with baptism to that windswept hill outside Jerusalem’s walls, the place of the skull, they called it. Golgotha. A place of torture, and military callousness, execution, and agony.

Who thinks up such things as that kind of death in that kind of place? I mean after all how did a heck of a nice guy end up in a hell of a place like that, strung up on a cross, his hands and feet pierced by spikes, blood trailing down the upright beam, gasping for enough air to fill his lungs just one more time, the humiliation of being stripped of all modesty while soldiers throw dice for his robe? What kind of

tortured mind lies awake at night to think up a means of execution like that? Maybe its someone like Cain who lies awake the night before he kills his brother.

And why *does* Jesus have to die there in such a tortuous place? Surely, he wasn't tried, found guilty and executed for preaching a gospel of love. Not for raising Jairus' daughter, nor healing the Centurion's servant, nor cleansing the lesions of a leper, nor taking compassion on a man who was unable to get up and outrun everyone else for a dip in the healing pool at Bethsaida.

It wasn't because he fed the 5000, or was transfigured on the mountain, nor even really because his disciples plucked grain from the fields on the Sabbath. He could have gotten away with all that, maybe even with that little parade into Jerusalem where his disciples threw palm branches in the way.

It wasn't because of the good things, the kind things, the healing things that he did, that he was strung up the way he was. It was because he challenged the powers of Pilate and Rome and Herod and the Sanhedrin, the Temple rulers, and the scribes and Pharisees who made of him the Outsider, the backwater rube from the north country of Galilee. ("Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" the sophisticates of Jerusalem asked.)

He was the Other, the rabbi without a portfolio, the teacher and healer and miracle worker that was a threat to the insiders in the big city, where class and station and accent and titles count.

That's the political answer of course, the historical answer, the theological answer to why he died on the cross. He pled the case of the poor, he called out the hypocrisy of those who cleanse the outside of the cup but not the inside. He overturned the tables of the money changers, and called down the stones of the temple itself because of its corruption. "Not a stone will remain on top of another," he said.

He was a threat to the powers of those in power. Blasphemy and sedition were the charges against him. Challenging the religious order of his day, and undermining the status quo of Roman rule. And because he was a threat they treated him to the worst that they could do.

He dies on the cross to call out the hypocrisy of the religious leaders of his day, *and* he dies on the cross the church says, for the sins of the world. For our sins, yours and mine. He never even knew us, nailed to that cross, but for all time and for all people, world without end, he died as payment for our sin.

Billy Graham preached that gospel of substitutionary atonement to perhaps 215,000,000 people during his lifetime. And while I have a lot of trouble understanding a God who needs a blood offering to be appeased, especially when that blood offering is God's own child, I am not the only one who has questioned whether that is a theology that is underlaid with the most horrific form of child abuse. To sacrifice one's child seems unthinkable. I need only remind you that God did not allow Abraham to sacrifice Isaac on that mountain but provided an alternative.

The Nicene Creed says "For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried."

Let's let the church's theologians say what they must about Jesus death for our sins. I am not one to deny that.

But I want to twist the lemon just a bit, to open up another way of understanding what's going on on that cross that makes just as much sense to me, if not more

Maybe what's going on is God's way of entering a hell of a world like ours, for the sake of the children of all ages that we are whom God so dearly loves.

I want to go back to that image of God holding each of us in her arms, sustaining us in every breath, nurturing us and enfolding us as a mother does a child, as father welcomes a newborn on his own flesh.

God enfolding us, embracing us...

Some years ago, a friend of mine who has since gone to his reward was telling me about his experience in an MRI machine. You know – that coffin like white tube that uses magnetic resonance to get good pictures of your innards. It is barely wide enough to swallow your body, and enclosed enough to make you claustrophobic. They ask you that question, you know?

Now having had a few of those encounters with the MRI machine myself, I listened carefully to what he was saying about his experience. Any of you who have been inside one of these big machines knows that they bang and hammer and thud, and click and make electrical sounds, many of them very loud.

They offer you headphones but if you are to follow instructions “Breathe in, breathe out, hold your breath...” you can’t really listen to the Beatles singing “Hey Jude,” or even hear Frank Sinatra belting out “Chicago” if you are going to concentrate on what they’re requiring of you.

So my friend, because he was a pastor, said he passed on the headphones, and opted instead to recite in his thoughts what scriptures and liturgies he could remember.

He got through the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm, several times (The Lord is my shepherd.). He worked his way through the wedding ceremony, “Dearly beloved we are gathered here in the presence of God,” and then he was working his way through the funeral service, “Our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth.” when without his realizing, he was finished and the palate on which he was lying was rolling back out to freedom. Not a bad trick.

But what I learned from him was even in that coffin-like structure with less room than the casket in which he eventually was laid to rest, God was with him. With him in the words of scripture, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” With him in the liturgies he knew, “Dearly beloved, we are gathered here.” And with him in the last words of all, “Our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth.” With him in the memories of occasions when others were with him as well, in prayer, in celebrations, in family gatherings, in worship, in the rising and setting of the sun and in the coming and going of days, in the morning mist on the lake in New Hampshire. In all the rhythms of his life, and ours.

A long time ago incidentally, you may remember that I shared with you a mantra, a kind of breathing exercise for the gym that I use, “Let thy spirit breathe through me. Let thy spirit breathe through me.” Inhaling and exhaling on those two phrases that become a prayer and a reminder that I am not alone, but that God is near.

Well, based on my friend’s MRI suggestion for keeping the mind focused, I have another breathing rhythm that I like now.

The Lord’s my shepherd,

I’ll not want,

He makes me down to lie,

In pastures green

he leadeth me

The quiet waters by.

Good for rowing, cycling, running. You heard it here.

And if God joins us in the good and joyful and happy occasions of life, the days when we are running, and resting, and at our best, enjoying life, then surely the cross reminds us that when we are at our worst as well, in the times when things are not going well, when our children are our worry and our

concern, when the loss of the ones we love breaks our heart, in the lonely, painful, discouraging and fearful times of life God is there with us.

Some years ago William Sloan Coffin, the former Chaplain at Yale and later pastor of the Riverside Church lost his son Alex, when Alex drove off the roadway after having too many drinks, and his car sunk in the water of Boston harbor. The Sunday after Alex's death, Coffin gave what is one of the most memorable sermons of the last years of the Twentieth Century.

He said that God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break as the waters parted and engulfed his son's car. And they were words that awakened a generation of faithful Christians to realize that God is a God of all seasons and times, present in the best and the worst that happens, joining us in those places where good people suffer bad things.

You will ask me where God was in Parkland, Florida at the Stoneman Douglas School on Valentine's Day, when a heck of a brave and good and innocent group of children and teachers were shot and killed in a hell of a place to be. And I will tell you that the cross tells me that God was in the midst of it, the first of all those to take a round and suffer the wounds, cradling the dying, weeping for the one with the gun, sorrowful that his children were yet again in agony, and suffering, which is all too much our way.

A lot of years in the ministry and what I have come to learn is that God on the cross is there so that in the meaningless, sad, horrible, impossible things that happen to us and to the ones that we love, we are not alone. That, in a nutshell, is what a heck of a nice guy like Jesus is doing at a hell of a place like the cross... God taking on the heart-breaking sin and sorrow of the world.

I sometimes wonder at that baptismal font what will happen to those children that I have baptized and held in my arms, and blessed on their way. God only knows.

"But in baptism, I know that we are united with Christ in his death and resurrection." And so throughout all our lives from infancy to old age, God cradles us, walks beside us, goes before us, meets us on our way. And the cross is the assurance that even in the worst of times, God is still with us, holding us when we are afraid, healing our wounds, weeping at our sorrows, rejoicing in our rejoicing. Watching us all night long, enfolding us in his arms, until the morning comes.

For the sake of all of us Jesus Christ was born a babe in Bethlehem. For the sake of all of us he grew up and preached a gospel of grace and forgiveness that passed from Galilee to Judea into all the world. For the sake of all of us, he faced a lonely hill outside Jerusalem's wall and suffered a terrible death. And for the sake of all of us, he rose triumphant from the grave.

In baptism, we are united with him in his death and resurrection. I am banking my life on it. And ever since that font, whether you realize it or not, so are you. So are we all.

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner **Now and Then**. Harper & Row: San Francisco, 1983. 54-55.