

Church of the Resurrection, Centerville - Palm Sunday, Year B - 4/05/09
Homily by Ruth Eller

Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. 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!" (Mark 15:38-39)

How does Jesus save us?

That is one of the deepest questions of our faith. Like all deep questions, it cannot be answered in a simple or even logical way. "Jesus saves" is not a proposition that can be explained in a philosophical argument.

True, there is a theological name for it: the Atonement—literally, at-one-ment, the way in which humanity is reconciled to God through Jesus.

But the atonement is not a simple thing. It is like a many-sided object made of stained glass. Each side bears a different symbol or picture which helps us to understand what it means that Jesus saves. But these pictures are also somewhat transparent, in the way of stained glass. So whichever one we're looking through, we see the glow of other shapes. Through each facet we also see, in a many-colored radiance, the heart of the mystery, the symbol of all symbols, the cross.

Throughout Lent we have been looking at the cross from different angles. We have looked up at the cross—at its "foolishness" in the letters of Paul, and at Jesus "lifted up" and "glorified" on it, in the gospel of John. As we walked the road to Jerusalem, we have heard Christ calling us to take up our own cross and follow him. This means our duty as disciples is always to prefer Christ-like ways of behaving, rather than the world's ways. Even at a time like this—a time when we are fighting wars on two fronts, a time when a single gunman can kill a dozen harmless people in a school which teaches, of all things, citizenship—even now, when we recognize that violence and hatred are facts of life, we must affirm our belief that they are not inevitable. They are not inevitable because God has given us the power to choose, and Jesus has shown us another way.

So you could say that one way Jesus saves, one facet of the Atonement, is that he shows us this alternative path. It is the Way of the Cross—it is God's way of giving and forgiving, and the more we walk this path the more we become at-one with God.

This Way usually calls for some sacrifice on our part. It might be the sacrifice of the goodwill of friends who have another way of looking at the world and who will not agree to disagree. It might be the choice to speak out against the company policy of exploiting young or immigrant workers. It might be giving up precious free time or even cracking open the nest egg to help someone in need or to spread the Good News of God's love. But the thing to remember about the cross is that while it always involves a death of some kind, it is the only path to real life—the life in which you know, in your heart of hearts, that you are being true to your God and to yourself. So what may appear foolish to the worldly wise, as Paul tells us, is really the wisdom of God. If we accept Jesus' invitation to take up our cross, you might say that Jesus is saving us from ourselves—or our selfishness, as you will—and giving us a much more satisfying life in return.

That is the Way of the Cross. Another way Jesus saves might be called The Broken Wall. The barrier between omnipotent, invulnerable God and emotional, fragile human beings dissolves in the Passion of Christ. This is especially clear in Mark's version of the crucifixion. Alone among the gospels, Mark shows us the anguish of Jesus, first as he faces the prospect of death and then as he actually suffers the physical torment of

crucifixion.

In Gethsemane just before he is arrested, Jesus is “distressed and agitated”. He even “throws himself on the ground”, praying desperately for his Father to relieve him of the necessity of dying. Later, Jesus’ only words on the cross are the first verse of Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” In quoting scripture, like a child he reverts to his familiar language, Aramaic. But he does not use the familiar Aramaic term “Father” any more. This is God almighty he’s talking to, and he feels abandoned.

Then, as he is dying, he emits one last inarticulate cry.

The centurion—the officer in charge of the troops carrying out this execution—is standing directly in front of Jesus. And hearing this cry, he exclaims: “Surely this man was God’s son!”

This must be one of the strangest moments in scripture. True, at that same moment the curtain separating the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Temple’s interior is torn in two. But the centurion can’t know that yet; the Temple is over on the next hill, in the city. What’s going on here? How could seeing a prisoner suffer through his last moments and hearing his death cry prompt a Roman soldier to say such a thing? Why would a person so completely, almost abjectly, human, suddenly seem divine?

Mark seems to be telling us that God becomes at-one with us in Christ by utterly abandoning all divine privilege. This is what Paul means when he speaks of Christ’s “emptying himself” in order to fulfill the purposes of God. In a moment of insight or inspiration or intuition, the centurion understands this. What he is really saying is, “I get it! This is what God is like! This is what God *is*! God is not totally above us, separated from us, but rather is right with us, even in our fear, even in our pain, even in our death.”

The physical curtain in the Temple could be mended. But the wall of separation between humanity and God had been ripped open forever. The Holy of Holies was originally built to contain the Ark of the Covenant, the chest containing the stone tablets of the Law delivered at Sinai. Only the High Priest could enter, and only once a year—on the Day of Atonement.

But now it wouldn’t be just the High Priest or even just one group of people, but all people and all nations—even the hated Romans—who could be *at one* with God. In last week’s reading the prophet Jeremiah looked forward to the day when the covenant would be written in the hearts of God’s chosen people. Now, with the death of Jesus, all people become God’s chosen ones. On this Day of Atonement, everyone is invited into God’s presence.

So that is another window into this mystery called “Jesus saves”. He saves by lifting us into the loving heart of God even, or perhaps especially, in those times when we feel most desperate, most abandoned, most fearful. Henri Nouwen, the great writer on personal spirituality, says that we live with our suffering best when we come to understand that “my pain” is “*the* pain”. In other words, we realize that in our suffering are *at one* with the suffering of the world, and therefore at one with the God who suffers.

Those are today’s windows into the way Jesus saves: First, the Way of the Cross: Jesus gives us a way to live that is the only real alternative to selfishness and violence. Next, the Broken Wall: Jesus brings us into intimate contact with God by breaking down the barrier between human and divine, by suffering even as we suffer.

I have one more picture. I leave it to you to name it.

You probably have seen this one. It’s the cross made of two steel girders which was found standing at the World Trade Center just after the towers collapsed. It was discovered by a worker who thought of himself as a pretty terrible person—in his own words, a real

S.O.B. He came upon the cross as he was making his way through the rubble in one of the damaged adjacent buildings. Fascinated by this strange sight—a perfectly proportioned cross bizarrely created by the destruction—he felt compelled to respond. So he extricated this accidental cross, dragged it out and set it up in a more open space. He then painted footprints leading from the place where he had found it to the foot of the cross.

He says that he felt his life was totally changed by this experience. Why? Because, being a terrible person, in that terrible place, at that terrible time, he found the cross. The painted footprints mark the path leading from chaos to meaning. Anybody could retrace his steps. So can I; so can you.

Jesus saves.