

WGF

Why did Jesus die?

Would we give the same answer today as the answer we might have given last year or even many years ago when we were younger? It seems to me this is a question that needs to be answered many times in my life, and I believe with all my heart it is a question you must ask and answer as well – if we want to call ourselves Christians.

Tonight is a night of questions ... more questions than answers, I'm afraid ... but that's okay. Answers don't often change us very much, at least not until they become our unique and "personal" answers to questions we have asked over and over and over again. Time changes our perspective and understanding and insight.

T.S. Eliot wrote a series of four poems published in 1943 collectively entitled *The Four Quartets*. These poems explore and contemplate time, perspective, humanity and salvation. They were criticized as being too overtly religious. The overarching theme of the poems is that suffering is needed for all of society before new life can begin. Humanity has a unique role to play in each generation, and each generation is united through space and time. The opening lines from the first poem, entitled "Burnt Norton," reflect this connection:

Burnt Norton

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.
Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden. My words echo
Thus, in your mind....

As our lives have progressed, what passages did we not take that we might explore again? What doors have we never opened that might be opened now?

Why did Jesus die?

For some reason, I have an interest in numbers and I have an interest in the patterns and insights often revealed by numbers in relation to other numbers and events. It is a curious fascination to me, and even though it is part of me, I cannot fully explain it. Sometimes I think I make up the connections. Sometimes I am sure I miss connections that are present, but I do not see or understand them. When I was contemplating our Good Friday service today, for some reason I wondered about the question of “How long ago did Jesus’ death occur?” That question presupposes we know the exact time of Jesus’ death, and if you are like me, I have often assumed we just don’t know the “factual” answer to that question. But there are scholars and theologians who spend large amounts of time and energy trying to answer questions like this.

With the caveat offered here that we might be wrong, many scholars have concluded that Jesus died at 3:00pm on Friday, April 3, in the year 33 C.E. Today is April of the year 2017. If we subtract thirty-three years from 2017, we find that Jesus was crucified and died one thousand nine hundred eighty-four years ago. Is there any significance that the separation of time between the crucifixion and today is the title of George Orwell’s dystopian novel *1984*? The novel focuses on the ways political totalitarianism negatively affects the human spirit, and how it is impossible to remain freethinking in that kind of political environment.

In Orwell’s society, the world is technologically advanced and uses fear as the primary tool for manipulation to control individuals who do not conform to the political “orthodoxy” of the time. Humankind has no control over their own lives in that world, every positive feeling is squelched, and people live in misery, fear and repression. Does that sound familiar at all to us in 2017? Orwell painted a negative picture to act as a mirror to society. When we look at something in a mirror, the image is “reversed” from our perspective, and the dystopian society portrayed is stark and clear in the “reversed” image of the utopian society envisioned by Orwell.

But with all due respect for the genius of Orwell, he was looking for the right thing in the wrong place. Political structures will never be able to lead us to freedom. In the days of Jesus, political structures were to be the death and demise of Israel as a nation. Jesus knew that and predicted that. And yet, one of his most often repeated admonitions to us was to “Fear not.”

Why did Jesus die?

I am confronted and confounded with the sheer magnitude of Christian tradition and orthodoxy (or “right” or “correct” belief) in ways that seem to me to do little to reveal God’s story and also do much to confuse me. I keep feeling uncomfortable with the overwhelming contradiction and conflict with the ongoing call to *follow* Jesus ... while hearing and watching “Christianity” (the perceived Christianity, or what I call “vocal” Christianity) seemingly unaware of the disconnect of contemporary life with the ongoing revelation of the Spirit in our world and the new and developing insights into our contemporary understanding of revelation in Scriptures. Do you feel any of that also?

Bruce has often quoted a Quaker saying: “Institutions exist for the painless extinction of the ideas which gave them birth.” You don’t have to be around for too long to recognize the truth of that saying, despite the best intentions of those in whatever institution we would like to talk about at the moment. So that is not a put-down as much as it is a rally cry for awareness. This is the reason it is critical that we, as a faith family, continue to answer the question of “why” behind the actions we take and the reasons we choose to do the things we do in *this* institution. At Corona del Mar Community Church and at The New Church, we have said for years that “We do not *go* to church – we *are* the church.” And that is true. The term for “the gathered people of God” is the *ecclesia*, and we are the gathered people.

However, there is an institutional “church” as well. To ascribe any kind of monolithic and unified understanding of theology is folly, to be sure. But also, to be sure, there is a hegemony or predominance of thought that pervades much of our society. As it pertains to most of our lives, that predominance of thought in regards to religion tends to come from a hodgepodge or smorgasbord of source material. Parents, church environment, culture, literature, music, movies and friends all have an influence on what we know and think and believe. If you are

anything like me, you probably carry a wide array of precepts and principles that, when examined closely, often contradict each other. Often, little harm comes from such things, because we do not link them to a larger sense of identity and purpose and call from God.

It is and was this greater awareness of identity and purpose and call from God that led me to seminary. It continues to lead me to wonder and ponder about the mission of God in the world. There is a discipline in Christian theology called “Systematic Theology.” This discipline is a methodology for formulating an orderly, rational and coherent account of the doctrines of the Christian faith. I have a daydream – a vision maybe – that someday (maybe soon) we will all write our own Systematic Theology dissertations in a retreat setting. If that sounds really boring, I want to share with you that it might be one of the most exciting exercises you can engage in to understand what YOU think and believe and what a profound influence it has on how you live your life.

When life gets tough and we find ourselves searching for answers to those critical questions about life and God, our lack of clarity and contradictory views often lead us astray. It is in those times when our questions get real that we find ourselves at the cross ... like tonight. No one comes singing and dancing to the cross. We come when we are broken and separated and bereft, or we do not come at all.

On Sunday, this sanctuary and others all around the globe will be far more full than it is tonight. Why is that? Jonathan’s sermon for Palm Sunday, “Partial Coronation,” was a wonderful reminder of our human condition. We want the “inheritance” without all of the relationship and corresponding responsibility that comes with the relationship. It is part of our human nature to want the joy without the suffering. But the joy does not often seem “true” or “complete” without the suffering.

At the beginning of this year’s Lenten season, Bruce’s sermon “The Offense” on Ash Wednesday led us once again on a journey to explore the theological disconnects of our day. In that sermon and in the other Lenten sermons, we have been led through ways to see a clearer portrayal of Jesus – as human as we are – staying true and faithful to serve the God who sent him. This is the same God who sends us. And it is this Jesus, the man, whom each and every one of us can follow. Jesus, the man, reveals this God who is sending us at *every* moment in time. Do you know how blasphemous this is to most of the “vocal” Christians in our society? Do you know how much fear

undergirds the “Jesus is God” proclamation? Do you know how fortunate we are to have the clarity of insight revealed by the declaration that we participate WITH Jesus into the call of God’s mission in the world and beyond?

Why did Jesus die?

I started this sermon by saying that tonight was a night of questions ... more questions than answers. And that is true. However, I am going to give one answer. To be clear, it is not THE answer; it is AN answer. It is an answer that hopefully will lead to even more questions, but we shall see.

In life and in relationship with God, not every question we ask leads us to the answer we want, or even to the answer we hope for or expect. God is creative – almost beyond comprehension or belief.

To the question “Why did Jesus die?” there are answers from every vantage point we can consider. But as that question kept coming to me during my prayer preparation time for this sermon, one answer kept bubbling up. The answer was so “obvious,” and I thought it so elementary, that I kept discarding it and seeking other answers. But the answer would not go away. So I let it “run” in my mind for a while. God does that to me sometimes. I don’t get what I want, so I keep looking other places.

When we think about the death of Jesus on the cross, we often don’t want to spend much time really thinking about and relating to the death itself. Much better to skip to the glory of Easter morning. And that time will come, if we will let it come, to each of us. But we have to get there through the pain and suffering and separation, or I don’t think it comes at all. When crucified, death comes from what cause? Someone shout out the answer ...

That’s right – asphyxiation (suffocation) is the cause of death.

Jesus died because he could not breathe.

Does this have any relevance for me? In Matthew 16:24, Mark 8:34 and Luke 9:23, Jesus tells us to “*take up your cross and follow me.*”

Where was Jesus led by taking up his cross? He was led to death by asphyxiation.

If Jesus is God who knew all things, then going to the cross with the hope and expectation of redemption is a sham, and I cannot follow him. Reading the accounts of the gospels, it is clear that Jesus, the man, had trust in God's authority and submitted his life to God's will and purpose – not his own will and purpose. His purpose and God's were unified. But he still had to be willing to die in order to be redeemed. Are we willing to die to anything and to trust God to redeem and resurrect something in us?

Ben Sherman is a writer, storyteller and business consultant in the Seattle area. He is a friend of several of our current and former congregation members. In one of his earliest books, he talks about being a field medic in Vietnam. He said that a field medic was trained to do three things, and the three things had to be done in exact order or death would likely follow. The three things were:

1. Restore breathing
2. Stop bleeding
3. Make mobile

In our spiritual and religious pursuits, the “vocal” church often gets these out of order. We want to stop bleeding (translation = feed the poor) or make mobile (translation = go out and do “mission work” or go out and evangelize or proselytize). I think a huge part of the demise of the relevance of Christianity to many in our society is manifested by putting these two things first and neglecting the first precept, which is to restore breathing (translation = “*be still and know that I am God*” (Psalm 46:10)).

Where are you short of breath tonight? Is that area dying? Will you allow it to die knowing and trusting, like Jesus trusted, that God will redeem and resurrect something in you that will be far better than whatever it is you are trying to keep alive?

The Jesus who died on Good Friday is not the same Jesus who was resurrected on Easter morning, and it is not the same Jesus we can experience today as Holy Spirit. I want to be willing to come to the cross *with* Jesus, this night and throughout my life, so that God might continue to redeem and transform me to be more like my brother Jesus, the Christ.

Why did Jesus die?

What is your answer this night?

For Good Friday, April 14, 2017, that is *your* meaning.

POSTSCRIPT

At our Good Friday service, I neglected to offer any insight regarding the sermon title “WGF.” Several people have asked about the meaning. When I began my preparation for this sermon, I kept asking a prayerful question of **Why Good Friday?** – really asking what God was asking me to share about this day. When it was time to submit a title for the sermon, WGF was my choice.

As I stayed in the story, reading, praying and contemplating all the gospel accounts of the crucifixion of Jesus, WGF morphed and I came to consider a statement of **When Good Fails.** If I stay in the Good Friday story only – if only Good Friday is in my consciousness – that is exactly what happened.

But Good Friday is not the end of the story, and despite the clear message to stay in that day and in that story for most of the sermon, we do know what happens. And ultimately what happens on Easter morning led to a proclamation and my final landing point for WGF, which is **When God Forgives.**

May we all know and receive the forgiveness God has given.