

“Christ’s Sacrifice; Our Benefit: God’s Work”

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First Presbyterian Church
Sunday, February 26, 2012**

**Old Testament Lesson: Genesis 9:8-15
New Testament Lesson: 1 Peter 3:18-22**

“Once upon a time a boy went to a revival meeting. The preacher held up a dirty glass. ‘See this glass?’ he said. ‘That’s you. Filthy, stained with sin, inside and out.’ He picked up a hammer, and said. ‘This hammer is the righteousness of God’. ‘It is the instrument of God’s wrath against sinners.’ The preacher put the glass on the pulpit and slowly, deliberately drew back the hammer, took deadly aim, and with all his might let the blow fall. But a miracle happened! At the last moment he covered the glass with a pan. The hammer struck with a crash that echoed through the hushed church. He held up the untouched glass with one hand and the mangled pan with the other. ‘Jesus Christ died for your sins,’ he said. ‘He took the punishment that ought to have fallen on you. He satisfied the righteousness of God so that you might go free if you believe in him.’

Well, when the boy went to bed that night, he could not sleep. (Thinking about) what he had seen and heard, he decided that he was terribly afraid of God..... Could he love such a God? He could love Jesus, who had sacrificed himself for him. But how could he love a God who wanted to ‘get’ everyone and was only kept from doing it because Jesus got in the way?”

That’s how Shirley Guthrie Jr. begins his discussion of Christ’s sacrifice in his book “Christian Doctrine.” Guthrie goes on to note that there’s something wrong with that preacher’s illustration of our sin and Christ’s sacrifice – that having Jesus die merely so that we could escape God’s wrath seems to put up barriers between us and God, not tear them down. And besides, notes Guthrie, “After the (preacher’s little) drama was over, (the glass – which represents our sinful nature) was still just as dirty as it was before.”

So what is the point of Christ’s sacrifice? Today we will seek to address that question by looking at Christ’s sacrifice, what benefit it is to us, and what motivated God to orchestrate this whole thing in the first place. In our New Testament Lesson, the Apostle Peter teaches that Christ “suffered for sins, once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God.”

So, right off the bat, we see that God’s desire is and has always been for us to be with God, to be without sin and to be able to stand before God with good conscience. But God had a problem: us. So today we’re going to look at how God turned a problem into a blessing.

In Genesis 6 at verse 5, which comes just before Noah and the flood, we read that “the LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, ‘I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have

created – people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.’ But,” says Genesis, “Noah found favor in the sight of the LORD.” Thank God for Noah. God could work with Noah. Noah was faithful in the sight of God. So through Noah, God established a covenant – a connection – with Noah and, as Michele read in our Old Testament lesson, a God connection with Noah’s descendants after him, that is, a connection with you and me and with all those who draw close to God as brothers and sisters in faith, children of the Lord Most High. This is covenant-the connection-God established through Noah and his descendents. And when Peter teaches about Christ’s sacrifice, he brings that “God connection” up to date – just as active and powerful today as it was in the days of Noah. God works throughout history – the same today as in Peter’s time as in Noah’s time. Christ’s sacrifice is what connects us to God down through all of history. Peter points to this timeless connection, when he says “God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark (the establishment of the new covenant), in which a few, that is eight people, were saved through water. And baptism,” says Peter,” which this prefigured, now saves you!” God works through and across history. The flood that cleansed the earth of the unfaithful who rejected God in the time of Noah is what laid the foundation for our baptism today. Through baptism, we are made clean, but “not as a removal of dirt from the body,” says Peter, “but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

This is the benefit that Christ’s sacrifice gives to us – Christ’s sacrifice calls to us, from across the ages, to pledge our lives to following Jesus Christ, as Peter said, with a good conscience, knowing that as followers of Christ we have been forgiven of our sins and are freed to draw closer and closer to God. Think about it: who could even face God with the burden of our individual sins, not to mention our collective, spiritual sin of rejecting God’s only Son, of sending Jesus to the cross? How can God even be with us after something like that? The answer is Jesus Christ. You see, Jesus doesn’t protect us from God’s wrath like some frying pan protecting a glass from the hammer. No, Jesus serves as our gateway to God’s grace and forgiveness. Somehow, God only knows, but somehow Jesus was permitted to suffer for our sins in order to bring us to God. But, of course, not everyone accepts this. Just as in the days of Noah there were some who would not seek and follow God’s way, there are some today who reject God in favor of going in another direction.

The youngest son of a certain Baptist minister decided he wanted to baptize the three family cats. The first two cats were mostly cooperative as the boy dunked them into the bathtub and then brought them back out. They were a bit miffed, but they didn’t protest too much. The third cat, however, gave a great struggle. When the boy held the cat over the tub, the cat scratched and clawed and tore himself out of the boy’s grip. As a result, the cat only got a small splash of water. over the tub, the cat scratched and clawed and tore himself out of the boy’s grip. As a result, the cat only got a small splash of water. And as the cat was running away, the boy could be heard shouting, “Fine, go ahead and be a Presbyterian if that’s what you want!”

Somewhere along the line, good Christians of good conscience decided to go their own way – in this case, Baptists who get dunked in water vs. Presbyterians who get sprinkled with water. But these are merely different practices for the same baptism, different ways of understanding our relationship to God and to one another; and in the end, who’s to say if one is better than the other, if one is right and the other is wrong? Who’s to say-but God alone?

Peter teaches that we all fall short of God's desire for us, that we all are misguided by sin and temptation and that it is baptism – in obedience to God, in the name of Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit – it is baptism that cleanses us of our sins through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But what is the connection between our baptism and Christ's death, and resurrection?

Dr. David Bartlett, New Testament professor at Columbia Theological Seminary, puts it this way, writing in the New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, "The shape and significance of the Christian life," says Bartlett, "are grounded in the story of Jesus' suffering and victory." Which is what Peter is talking about, right? Our reading today begins by saying, "Christ also suffered for sins once for all," and it ends by talking about how the resurrection of Jesus Christ is what gives power to our baptism covenant – or the baptismal connection that we have with God. "It is not baptism that saves," says Bartlett, "but rather the resurrection of Christ into whom the faithful are baptized."

Do you see how our sin, and God's desire for us to be cleansed of sin, and Christ's death and resurrection are all connected? Even the history of our spiritual ancestor Noah is connected to us through Jesus Christ. As Michele read to us from Genesis, God said to Noah, "I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood." And Noah, good man that he was, must have thought to himself, "Nobody's perfect. How then, God, how then will you account for the things we do that displease you?" To which, as history has shown, God answered, "Have patience, Noah; I have a plan." And "God waited patiently," writes Peter, "during the building of the ark" – during the formation of the ark of the new covenant, this new connection between us and God that is completed once and for all in Jesus Christ. God's patience with us is amazing. God's desire for us to be connected to God is so strong nothing else stands up to it. This is what motivated God to allow Jesus to die for our sins – God's desire that we be connected to God.

In Jesus Christ, God fulfills the pledge to Noah that never again shall all flesh-and us primarily cut off from God. And yet God waits patiently still. Through the grace of Jesus Christ, God waits as we work out our baptismal vocation – as we come to grips with who we are as Christians and what that means to our lives, the lives of our loved ones, and the life of the world all around us. We are free to grow in our faith – to be the imperfect people we are – because Christ is the completion of God's pledge to Noah to never again cut off all flesh by the waters of a flood – or by any other means.

As you journey through Lent – giving up this and taking on that, and eagerly anticipating our Easter celebration – let us all be mindful of what we have already given up and what we are continually taking on in our baptism in Jesus Christ. In our baptism, in the waters that began a good work in Noah, that completed it in Jesus Christ, and that renews it daily in us – in our baptism, we give up our sinful and misguided ways and we take on Christ's victory, victory over all that would otherwise separate us from God. **Amen**

Pastoral Prayer

Wondrous God, we long to be people who live and walk in the light of your glory. But sometimes we find ourselves shrouded in darkness – the darkness of fear, anger, temptation, and rebellious ways.

In our anguish and despair, we cannot always find you. Help us trust that you will lead us out of the shadows and back into your radiant presence. Fill us with your light so we are able to chase away the demons that taunt us in our darkest moments.

For though we are your servants, Lord, we come before you as broken and misguided people: People with our own agendas. People who want life to be good and easy.

People who, if we see a need, too often we turn away.

We can't seem to care for ourselves, so how are we to help a world in disarray? Show us, Lord, show us the light of your glory and lead us in how to respond to the needs of this world.

Turn us into your instruments in feeding the poor, sheltering the homeless, caring for the sick and dying, and comforting those who grieve.

And in all of this, Lord, shine in us so that our faces reflect your light and love to all those who don't yet know your saving grace. Let us forever tell of your glory, in all that we say and do. And let our testimony as followers of Christ begin today, with the very words that you taught us to pray together, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

Amen.

