

“Covenants and Crosses”

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(Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38)
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If you sometimes feel your faith is second-rate, minor league, or “not up to snuff,” this sermon is for you. Hope has a way of mixing it up pretty well with doubt and seasons of low faith. And that’s our story: Peter rebuking Jesus out of confusion and uncertainty. Peter loving Jesus with all his heart, but afraid to follow him to a cross. Let there be no doubt about one thing: This is our story.

Fast forward a moment to after the resurrection: doubt scattered like seed blown on the wind in the minds of the followers of Jesus. There’s Thomas, the first positivist, demanding proof. There are the eleven disciples on the mountain: “When they saw Jesus [raised from the dead] they worshiped him; but some doubted.”^[1] Or go back in time to old man Abraham, “as good as dead” (Heb 11:12), hoping against hope. And here’s Peter trembling at the cross.

Faith is not about certainty. The Bible is not much for definition but it offers a definition of faith: The substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. William James argues that we can have strong religious commitments without knowing for certain that we are right.^[2] Like Abraham hoping against hope.

Let’s do this Abraham thing – hoping against hope – when it comes to the cross. Look at this cross – the dominant image casting its shadow over Lent and life – and know that Jesus saw it as his vocation. The cross says, “This is who Jesus is.”^[3] Let’s dare to claim that Jesus knew who he was, had a passionate understanding of his vocation, and that he is teaching the disciples about the cross.^[4]

What spooked Peter so much that he began to rebuke Jesus? He’s scared. We lash out in anger when afraid. Try to pick up an abandoned kitten and draw back a scratched hand from those angry claws.

Peter’s scared because he probably knew would-be Messiahs like Theudas and Judas the Galilean.^[5] He had heard this crazy talk all around him as a boy. Galilee was a hotbed of Zealot fever. The woods were full of people who thought they were the Messiah. Roman post office walls filled with mugs of would-be Messiahs. When Earl Long was governor of Louisiana, his opponents managed to have him locked in an insane asylum. Earl kept crying, “Let me out of here. I’m the governor of Louisiana.” A man in the next cell finally said, “Shut up. When I came in here I thought I was Napoleon.”

What made Jesus different? Jesus learned as Messiah-in-training, or as the writer of Hebrews puts it so well: “He learned obedience through what he suffered” (Heb. 5:8).

The scroll of Isaiah, especially Isaiah 52:7-12 and Isaiah 53, became a mirror. “How beautiful upon the mountains, are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation.” “O Lord, am I your messenger announcing the forgiveness of sins?” As N. T. Wright says, “Jesus saw himself as possessed of an awesome vocation to bring Israel’s exile to an end. This was a terrifying Pascalian wager.

He knew he might be wrong."^[6] His cry from the cross reeks of uncertainty: "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?"

So if Isaiah 52:7-12 proclaims end of exile, Isaiah 53 has the blueprint: suffering servant. Isaiah's original servant was supposed to be Israel – the very people worshiping in the temple – but God had long ago quit that place: ICHABOD. Once place of prayer for all people, now den of thieves. When Jesus came to Jerusalem, the town was no longer big enough for him and the temple. And then he became for us the Temple and the glory of God returned to offer fellowship and forgiveness.^[7]

I feel empathy for all those believers swallowing hook, line, and sinker the sensationalist, dispensationalist ideas that preparations are now underway for the construction of the Third Temple in Jerusalem. These believers have invested millions of dollars in the attempt to raise the perfect red heifer for the re-establishment of the OT sacrificial system. Texas and Midwestern ranchers are involved in this breeding project. But there is no need for the Third Temple. Don't you see? Jesus is the Third Temple. "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." I love the way John puts it in his gospel: The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us." And then they nailed that flesh to a cross.

Look at this cross one more time! Because the cross shouts across the centuries, "This is how the Christian life is supposed to be." Mark me with the sign of the cross. This man is attempting to follow Jesus. This cross identifies us not as Catholics or Baptists. Not as black people or white people. But as followers of Jesus. Cross bearers use goodness to counteract badness. Cross bearers get involved in people's lives and risk everything to do it. Cross bearers stick their noses in to injustice wherever it rears its cruel head.

Cross bearing is simply harder than anything else we have ever imagined. Here is the cross of Jesus Christ. And no matter how tentative or fragile or incomplete you think your faith is, Jesus accepts it and embraces it. Maybe we can find within us the courageous loyalty of uncertain Thomas, who surveying all the options once said, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."^[8] Indeed, let us go with Jesus.

[1] Matthew 28:17.

[2] William James, "The Will to Believe." Thanks to Bill Trollingier for providing this idea. Bill wrote, "Do you know William James' wonderful essay, 'The Will to Believe'?" In this piece he makes the case for religious conviction in this age of science, arguing that one can have strong commitments (in this case, religious commitments) without knowing for certain that one is right: "I think that I know the truth," as opposed to "I know that I know the truth." Moreover, he makes the argument for acting without certainty, noting that not to act is an action in and of itself. He ends the essay with this lovely (albeit melodramatic) example of a man trapped on a mountainside in a blizzard. He can be cautious and stay put, because he can not see . . . but there is a very good chance he will die in that spot. Or, he can step out in uncertainty -- he can act without knowing for sure (he can will to believe) -- and perhaps save his life.

[3] William Wrede and Albert Schweitzer: skepticism faces eschatology. The Jesus Seminar argues that Jesus was a teacher of timeless truths, into whose pure early teaching his disciples put an artificial note of eschatology. This makes Mark a theologically motivated fiction. I dissent from this view by claiming that Jesus did believe he would die on the cross. I recently read *When Faith Meets Reason: Religion Scholars Reflect on their Spiritual Journeys*. One of the contributors to this volume

gave me the impetus for this sermon. Theodore J. Weeden, Sr. says, "I can no longer hold in good conscience that God delivered Jesus up to death for our sake as a sacrifice for our sins, or that his death in itself has any saving significance. I do not hold that Jesus historically ever viewed himself as the Messiah or Son of God, or held any other exalted understanding of himself, nor perceived God to have bestowed on him any elevated status. Nor do I hold that Jesus chose an inner circle of twelve disciples to accompany him on his ministry, to serve as his apostles, and to represent symbolically the restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel." In another passage, Weeden says, "I can no longer hold as historical truth Jesus' virgin birth, resurrection from death, ascension into heaven, and exaltation to God's right hand, where he remains until he will 'come again to judge the quick and the dead,' as the Apostles Creed puts it. I no longer hold as factual Jesus' 'Palm Sunday' entry into Jerusalem, his betrayal by Judas and denial by Peter, his 'Last Supper' commemoration of his anticipated martyrdom, followed by his departure to Gethsemane, where he was arrested."

[4] N. T. Wright, "Jesus' Self-Understanding."

[5] Acts 5:35-37.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid. Wright's proposal that Jesus represents the Temple in his death, suffering, and resurrection is the main idea developed in this sermon.

[8] John 11:16.