

Foundations of Our Faith: Cross

Take a look at the compelling photo Amanda selected as the title slide for this sermon series. What do you see?



No, this isn't some Rorschach psychology test. It is a spiritual checkup. What do you see when you look at this photograph? A hill. Sun breaking through clouds...maybe a sunrise? A tree line. Oh, and a cross. But, when you look at that cross what do you see, what does it cause you to feel? Foolish? Ashamed even? Or wise? Confident even?

This little exercise is my attempt to do a field experiment of Paul's categories. Is the cross a sign of failure or a sign of power? I suppose it all depends on your perspective. Your spiritual perspective.

What you see, or more specifically, that which you feel when you see the cross, gives you a very good insight into the state of your faith.

SLIDE “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (v. 18)”

I want to highlight a few words here. There is time for those who are perishing to gain a new perspective on the cross. Those who see a cross and react with laughter or scorn, God is patiently waiting for you to get fitted with new

lenses. God is working hard in your life to give you a new view of the message the cross is sending. This is why we preach.

I really don't have anything real pithy or smart to tell you about this today. It all seems so basic, so, well, foundational. But then I take comfort in the fact that God isn't looking for my preaching to be pithy or smart. I mean, I didn't write the plan of salvation. God did. And the fact that the plan of salvation comes about through the life of a man born to a virgin, a man who remains single and homeless and without a steady job, a man who claims to be God with the authority to turn over tables in the temple and to be destined to rise after his inglorious death on an instrument of torture and burial in a borrowed grave; the fact that this is the plan of salvation sounds foolish to the perishing is not my responsibility, any more than the fact that that same story has the power to bring life from death is my responsibility. I am just the messenger sent to deliver the foolish message. But I can live with that because,

SLIDE...God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. (v. 21)

So it is that I stand here today preaching a message this odd message.

SLIDE...we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews...

The message of the cross was a stumbling block to the Jews because the Hebrew Bible told them that anyone hung on a tree was under God's curse. They were right about that. But what they couldn't grasp was that the curse was for their and our benefit, so that we would not suffer the punishment of that curse.

And the message of the cross was a stumbling block to the Jews because they came to believe that the prophets words promised them a Messiah who would be a political hero, a conquering warrior, not someone condemned to death and dying among the criminals on a hill far away. They were right, of course, but what they missed is that victory was on the other side of the cross. They had the wrong perspective. They needed a new set of lenses.

Sadly, the pages of history, even current events, are filled with Christians who have shared this same very wrong understanding of who Jesus is, of the message of the cross on which he died. They go on crusades and attack institutions, seeking to overthrow them to claim power for themselves and their agenda, calling on the name of Jesus to support their ill-conceived goals. The fact that God is love, the truth that God forgives God's enemies in mercy and grace, and that God calls on us to do the same toward our enemies, that all seems to be lost on so many people. The cross remains a stumbling block throughout history

for people who demand that Jesus endorse a message that is contrary to the message of the cross. So, our message is to call them to repentance, to turn from the path of the perishing onto the path that saves them.

This is why we keep on preaching foolishness. We keep preaching the message of the cross which is

...foolishness to Gentiles... (v. 23)

The Gentiles refer to the people who in Paul's day and across the centuries, are only wise in the ways of the world. They are among the brightest and most powerful. They control the engines that drive the world. Alas, their wisdom turns out to be so much rubbish when they try to use it to buy happiness and joy. Their wisdom, it turns out, is folly. But we keep on preaching these words to plant seeds that the Spirit will one day, we pray, cause to blossom.

Once properly seen, the cross is,

...to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (v.24)

God wants us to bring this message to the modern day 'Jews and Greeks', those who try to use the name of Jesus to gain political power, those who try to rule social, political and economic structures as a means of gaining power over the world; God says to these who think the true message of the cross is foolish, who believe that they are wise, that they too may find the truth if they will allow the Spirit to show them that life is found on a hill in a piece of wood which bore the sins of the world.

And God will win. That is the message of the Cross too. Believe it,

SLIDE For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. (v. 25)

Would it not have made it easier to spread the Good News if it was not about a cross but rather about health and wealth? If we had as the symbol of our salvation not a cross but a dollar sign; if we celebrated not an empty grave but a luxury spa where all ills are cured; if we offered a fount filled with the elixir of eternal youth instead of a fountain filled with the blood of eternal life, would not the churches be filled to overflowing?

This has been tried, of course. There are famous health and wealth, prosperity gospel preachers. There are certain sects which gain many converts with these types of promises. Why do they work? Because they ignore the true gospel, they change the story of the Suffering Servant into the story of the Guru of whatever false promise you want to chase. But in the end, they will all be exposed as pretenders to the cross.

How much easier it would be to be a pastor who could promise healing to every disease; reconciliation for every relationship; raises for everyone with financial burdens. But that is not the message of the cross. The message of the cross is not a magic potion to cure every ill but a reassurance that we will be made strong in our weakness, that Christ suffers with us, that on the third day Christ arose victorious and so shall we if we have faith in the God whose message is nailed to a cross.

To preach Christ crucified is to offer transformational hope to the spiritually paralyzed, which is what makes the work of being a Christian pastor finally satisfying.

The cross does not deny the reality of pain and death. "It reinforces it. (But) it denies its finality." (H. Richard Niebuhr)

The message of cross promises that our broken bodies and relationships will find healing. The cross offers God's power to deliver the hope of resurrected bodies and restored relationships.



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Big Idea

The Cross is an instrument of death which, in God's plan, is a source of life for all who believe in its saving power through Christ, the Crucified One.

When you look at the picture of the Cross, my friends, I pray that you see Jesus. That you see someone who suffered and died, yes. But someone who conquered suffering, someone who defeated death, who took the power of the cross to roll away the stone and emerge into the rising of the sun.

Ah, the foolishness of God.

Thank God.

Praise Jesus.