

The Cruciform Life: A Biblical Paradigm
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Texts: Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Luke 24:36, 44-49

I'd like to begin by thanking Andrew Johnson and the session of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church for the privilege of preaching from this pulpit for the month of March. Probably, most of you know that I am a professor of Old Testament studies at Queen's University. I am not sure if what you are going to hear from me over the next month will sound more like sermons or lectures. Perhaps the only thing I can assure you of, is that the ushers will not be handing out the essay topics and no one will be contacting you about signing up for the tutorial.

Well, one way of thinking about a Messiah or a Christ-figure, is to think about such a person as God's designated change-agent in history. Certainly, many in Jesus' day were looking for radical transformation in the history of the Jewish people. But, at the heart of the story of Christ Jesus lies a series of events that no one expected. No one thought that God's designated change agent in history was going to be executed and then raised from the dead. In fact, the gospels tell us that the disciples were unable to comprehend Jesus' predictions that he would die a terrible death at the hands of the authorities in Jerusalem before being raised from the dead. Neither the violent death of the Christ nor his resurrection was on their scripturally informed radar.

The passage we read this morning from Luke's gospel depicts the resurrected Christ trying to help his shattered disciples understand how what had happened actually conformed to scriptural tradition. Here we encounter the Messiah telling his disciples, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead..." What kind of pattern of scriptural experience did Jesus think his messianic life, death and resurrection fitted into? And, how can that pattern have anything to say to us as we try to follow the spirit of Christ today? These are questions I want to explore in this series of sermons throughout the month of March.

I am going to call the pattern that Jesus refers to in our passage from Luke, "the cruciform life" or, if you like, "the cross-shaped life." Now, in the Church we often emphasize the uniqueness of what Jesus did through his life, death and resurrection. But it's also important to recall that this same pattern of movement—from one quality of life to another, from one state of consciousness to another, from life before resurrection to life after resurrection—reflects a process that is part and parcel of the spiritual journey that we as followers of Jesus are called to engage in. In other words, the cross-shaped life is another

name for what the first followers of Jesus knew as being born again, being born from above, or being born of the spirit. How can we participate in that journey of transformation, not simply in the world-to-come, but in this life? What might the cruciform life mean for our own development as disciples of Christ?

Before we can answer those questions, we have to deal with the same stumbling block that also stymied the first disciples: that is the cross. Wouldn't the scriptural metaphor of the cruciform life go well enough without the cross? Why bring this instrument of degradation and torture into the mix?

Much has been written about crucifixion in the ancient Mediterranean world and, indeed, it makes for very difficult reading. As a means of public execution, crucifixion was designed to be as painful and as shameful a death as possible. By definition, crucified persons were the very worst kind of criminal and their cruel deaths were meant to deter other potential malefactors. For that reason, crucifixion was routinely used as a way of executing rebellious slaves and other persons condemned as enemies of society. And, it was as an enemy of society that Jesus was crucified.

Although one can characterize the trial of Jesus as a very unjust procedure, in effect, Jesus was condemned by the religious and secular authorities in Jerusalem for sedition. The scribes and the priests thought that they controlled the only legitimate ways to come to God; but Jesus offered another way—one that did not contradict them so much as offer an unanticipated alternative when he said, “come and follow me.” But it was for that reason, ultimately, that he was killed. Moreover, although the Gospels show the Roman authorities in a more favourable light, there is little reason to think they thought differently. Rome had little patience with Messianic movements that threatened its control over Judea. It would not have hesitated to execute a popular teacher around whom Messianic speculation swirled.

“Thus it is written,” says the resurrected Jesus, “that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead.” If we take the gospel record seriously, the suffering that he underwent was the result of actions of cultural transgression deliberately undertaken as God's chosen change agent in history. Moreover, if we follow what Jesus is saying here, then it appears that the actions of cultural transgression which brought about his suffering had two unexpected characteristics. First, they had scriptural precedent and, second, they were a necessary condition for the experience of resurrection.

Let me run that line of reasoning by you again: Jesus suffered on the cross because he was perceived to be a dangerous person. That danger consisted in his violation of acceptable social norms underwritten by the Church of his time and the State. If we accept the cross as a key component of the transitional movement I am referring to, we have to recognize a very important aspect of the cruciform life: it almost invariably involves some form of cultural conflict.

Think, e.g., of the Exodus story mentioned in the reading from Deuteronomy this morning: the deep conflict involved in claiming freedom for Israel from the slavery imposed by Egypt. In fact, all the major biblical characters we will study in this set of sermons found themselves in conflict with some set of social norms. But they also had some intimation of resurrection.

In the weeks to come, I will suggest that the scriptural pattern the resurrected Jesus claimed he conformed to can be found in the stories of many different divinely chosen change agents. The ones we will focus on are those of Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah and Ruth. In each case, we will find evidence that their faith journeys led them to make unconventional and in many cases controversial choices, ones that placed them in conflict with key values or customs sanctioned by the societies in which they lived in. But through their convictions they forged new moments in the history of salvation. Through their sufferings they gave birth to new ways of relating to God in the world. That is the pattern of the cruciform life.

There is Abraham: stepping out of his cultural matrix in a model of faith that will allow the whole world to know the righteousness of God in a new way. There is Moses: leading the children of Israel through the refining fires of the desert in order to realize a new identity as the people of God. There is Jeremiah: standing up to the dysfunctional religion of his time, but at the same time preparing the ground for a new experience of salvation. There is Ruth: abandoning hearth and home out of unconditional love for her Israelite mother-in-law and in the process becoming the grandmother of King David, himself a kind of Messiah.

Each of those stories is so rich, and their engagement with the cruciform life so profound that they can hardly be addressed in a single sermon. That is one of the reasons why I am tying this set of sermons to a series of Bible studies I will be conducting at St. James Anglican church near the campus of Queen's University. Each sermon that I preach this March will be posted afterwards on the website of St. James Anglican church. You will be able to read it there and download it if you want to. This is intended to be an ecumenical Bible study that will take place over five Wednesdays in March and April during Lent. I hope that some of the members of this and other congregations will feel comfortable enough to come to St. James to discuss the ideas contained in these sermons and bring your own thinking to bear on these great and seminal stores from scripture. I am under no illusion that I completely understand these texts and I am looking forward to reflecting on them with you.

I am also offering this series of sermons and studies conscious that the liturgical year is about to change. This is the last Sunday of the season of Epiphany, when we celebrate the fact that the light of God has come into the world incarnate in Jesus Christ. Next Sunday is the first Sunday of Lent.

Traditionally, starting this coming Ash Wednesday, Christians are encouraged to engage in acts of introspection and self-examination in preparation for Good Friday and Easter Sunday. So it seems only appropriate that as we contemplate the cross-shaped life, we turn to celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion.

Here in this Holy Meal we celebrate God's great in-breaking into human history. But here, as St. Paul reminds us, we also recall Christ's death until he comes. Here we encounter God graciously inviting us to come into the light out of darkness, and out of the slavery into liberty. But, as we do so, we also participate in acts of cultural resistance that echo the ministry of Jesus. Here, at this holy table, we meet a God who is not interested in what the world or organized religion thinks of us. Neither our wealth or our poverty, our health or our infirmities, our social acceptability or the extent of our knowledge determine our right to partake in this holy meal. This table is the Lord's, and it belongs to all those who seek to follow Jesus. At the Lord's Supper we are offered an account of ourselves that opposes all the deadly judgements of society. Here we are offered an opportunity to discover ourselves as the Messiah sees us: to rise from this table as brothers and sisters of Jesus—not as citizens of the kingdoms of this world, but of the Kingdom of God. Amen! Come Lord Jesus!