

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
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Why did Jesus have to die?

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The cross has been a stumbling block for people ever since that day when Jesus' followers scattered in fear. They did not understand. How could they? Even when he had spoken of dying and being raised on the third day, there was no context within which they could comprehend that saying. Never before had God done what he was about to do. Even after the resurrection, the closest followers of Jesus were still hiding in fear. After the Holy Spirit was given on Pentecost, they finally went out into the world with full confidence and courage, but even that didn't remove the sting of the cross.

For centuries the early Church spent much time in discussion and debate about the whole Christ event—his birth, his life and teaching, his miracles and healings, his suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension. It was literally hundreds of years, marked by constant theological refinement, before we developed the nuanced understandings that we have now about the nature of Jesus, his dual nature as fully human and fully divine, and the nature of God as Holy Trinity, a unity of being in a trinity of persons. This was the age of heresies, when highly developed arguments were abandoned, one by one, and the followers of the crucified one slowly zeroed in on the classic understandings of God that are so familiar to us today. This whole process was made more difficult by the fact that what we know as *the Bible* was still a fluid collection of books, some favored by one branch of the Church, some favored by another. As arguments were declared heretical, so were certain books that had been used by Christians, including different

versions of the Gospels. It wasn't until the fifth century that the Church finally decided which of the books would be considered Holy Scripture.

I mention all this simply to point out that many people, over a long period of time, were involved in figuring out who Jesus was, and how he represented God. In all that time, and even until today, there have been a number of ways to understand what it was that Jesus accomplished on the cross, and how indeed he accomplished it.

We know, for instance, because we proclaim it in our confessions of faith known as Creeds and because we read it, in some form or another, in the Bible, that Jesus came to save sinners; and that his death on the cross, followed by his resurrection on the third day, was in some decisive way a victory over sin and death, and the act by which we are redeemed, and saved, and offered eternal life. But why did Jesus have to die?

Was it necessary, in some absolute way, that God would offer his own Son as a sacrifice for our sins, thereby he would bear the punishment that we could not bear, and pay the penalty we could never pay, and satisfy God's need for blood, God's need for a death to somehow balance out the cosmic scales of justice? Was this barbaric form of divine child abuse necessary? If God is powerful enough to create the whole universe, isn't he able to figure out some other way to cleanse us from our sins? Isn't God in a position simply to forgive our sins, if he chooses to, without some dramatic display?

The cross has indeed been a stumbling block for the faithful, and for those outside the faith, ever since that day. Poor preacher that I am, I cannot clear up this mystery for you.

I mean... I do have thoughts on the subject, as I'm sure you do as well. I do have this sense that God wanted us to love him in return so badly that he needed to demonstrate in a powerful way the depth of his love for us. So he showed us himself in a human form, and his

love was so intimidating to the powers of this world that it needed to be snuffed out. Or I could talk about how God took on all the powers of darkness in the person of Jesus, from his temptation in the wilderness, to his gut wrenching prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, and in his crucifixion he was locked in mortal battle with these forces which seemed to win at his last breath, only to be conquered finally on the third day. Or I could talk about how the first Adam failed to obey God and was cast out of God's presence in the garden, subjecting all that followed him to the same fate; and that in Jesus we have a new Adam, one whose will is perfectly matched to God's, whose obedience is absolute, even to this painful death, thereby restoring the goodness with which we were originally created, restoring to wholeness the image of God imbedded in us in creation. Or I could talk to you about how Jesus shows us the true nature of God, the true nature of his love, and calls us to follow, picking up our cross as we do, to love as he loved, to give of ourselves for one another, so that we can live in God's kingdom, and glory in new life in Christ.

There are other things I could talk to you about, other theories about the meaning of Christ's suffering and death. But this evening we are left with that picture which is so hard to get out of our minds, the image of Jesus hanging on the cross, the image of a man, God's own son, suffering and dying on the cross. And after all the theories are explored, and all the arguments weighed, we are still left with that nagging question, "Why?"

Maybe that's the point. Maybe we are meant to struggle with the meaning of this terrible act. Maybe the very struggle calls us to a deeper relationship with God and one another. Maybe we are supposed to do exactly what we are doing right here, right now, contemplate Jesus' crucifixion, even venerate his cross, and offer our humble thanks to God for all he has done for

us. Maybe this mystery was intended to be a mystery forever. Can we celebrate the mystery of our salvation as a mystery? Can we accept it without fully understanding it? Can we talk about it, share the story with others, without knowing the proper words to express it faithfully? Can we take all that is in our hearts today as we look upon our Lord crucified, can we encompass it in some way, express it in some way, take all those feelings and work them into the overall meaning of our lives? We may always fail in the attempt to comprehend the meaning and purpose of Christ's crucifixion, but maybe the attempt is worth something in itself.

The man who so long ago hung upon a tree,
he died there once, and for all time, somehow for me.

Amen.