

Title: “Jewish Community’s view of the cross”

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Ezekiel 2 & Mark 15:9-15

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Lesson: *The crowd shouted, “Crucify Him!” This group was comprised of three types of people: those that didn’t know him, those that knew of and followed him, and those that knew of and hated him. We explore these groups and apply them to our world and our own lives.*

Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

“Crucify him!” This is what the crowd shouted. “Crucify him!” In those days they knew exactly what they were asking for, they knew exactly what it meant to send a person to the cross. They had witnessed many non-Roman citizens whipped and beaten nearly to death, their skin ripped from their bodies, and then hung on a cross to eventually die. They knew that Pilate didn’t change his mind, so once the fate of a prisoner was sealed the punishment would be carried out. They knew all of this so why did they call for Jesus’ crucifixion? What drove them to that place, at that time, to demand from Pontius Pilate an act of extreme torture for someone that many of them had just met? Or, maybe many of them had *never* met?

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the city was filling with Jews from all over the kingdom of Judah. It’s recorded that about two million people filled the city to undergo a week-long purification ritual that was a necessary preparation for the celebration of Passover. They all gathered for one reason - to remember the time when God led his people out of slavery from Egypt. They came from all corners of the kingdom: from Tyre in the North to Bethlehem in the South. They came from the same towns and areas that Jesus had traveled and performed miracles in. Undoubtedly some of them, maybe many of them who arrived had heard and even seen some of these miracles. Were any of them part of the crowds that he fed with a few fish and bread? Had they heard about him raising Lazarus from the grave? Do you think that the married couple from Cana in Galilee, who ran out of wine, was there? Were any of them aware that, right there in Jerusalem, just the night before, he restored the ear of a man who came to arrest him?

I sometimes wonder where I would be in that crowd. Would I have been one that laid branches down to welcome Jesus into the city or would I have asked who he was? Would I have shouted “Hosanna!” or would I have shouted “Crucify Him!” I don’t know, but I know that I can use it to interrogate my own life in the shadow of the cross. And, more broadly, we can compare our actions to the assumed actions of the Jewish community. We may not know much about them, but we do know that people from this community followed Jesus from the court to the cross and that fact is robust enough for our introspection. So, I’d like to start by following each of those three groups of people: those that didn’t know him, those that knew of and followed him, and those that knew of and hated him. I’d like to follow them to the cross because through their eyes we have an opportunity to look into our hearts. Are you ready?

The first group of people were those that didn't know him. Matthew (21:10-11) records this group in his gospel:

¹⁰And when [Jesus] entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, "Who is this?" ¹¹And the crowds said, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee."

For three years Jesus traveled the land, healing, teaching, and forgiving. There were great crowds that followed him, and many more that spoke about him, and they spoke to others, who spoke to others, who spoke to others. And yet throughout the entire kingdom there were some that had yet to hear his name. We can compare our communication methods with theirs and completely understand why his name wasn't as common as we might expect it to be, but even in our world today, with all of the modes of communication that we have, all of the possible ways to quickly travel around the world, there are those that don't know the name of Jesus. How can that be? How is that even possible? And we don't even have to travel across an ocean or to a third world country to find people like this, there are some right here in this area, in Cleveland who have never heard of him or of the salvation that he offers. And so, I challenge myself and I challenge each of you during Lent, during this week, what can you do to introduce just one person to Christ? What can you do to reduce that total by one? Just one?

Now, this group of Jews, those that didn't know Christ, might have been at his trial. Now, at this point, however, they couldn't claim ignorance for he was standing right there. They knew him, at least by name. They may not have known much more about him, but they at least knew that he existed. And, because they had no relationship with him, they could have been easily influenced by their society at that time. They could have been swayed to go along with this crowd and call for his crucifixion. And when Jesus was sentenced and when he began the final walk to Golgotha, do you think these people traveled with him or do you think that they quickly lost interest and continued their participation in the festival? If they didn't understand the significance to their eternal life from this great exchange that was about to take place, if no one told them more about the work of Jesus than simply his name, why wouldn't they have remained lukewarm towards him? They would have traveled to the cross and watched out of curiosity, having no personal connection to what was going on. They would have no reason to consider him as anything but a footnote in their life story. We have the same situation today. Paul talks about our responsibility as a function of the church, as something that we do, not as individuals, but as one body. He writes (1 Corinthians 3:6):

⁶I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.

You see, when Paul wrote that Apollos watered, he wasn't describing an assembly line. He was describing the awesome ability of God to use his church to ensure that life events contribute to the growth of a Christian. But he is also reminding us of the commission that Christ gave us. We are called to make disciples of all nations. This reminds me of a young salesman who was disappointed about losing a big sale, and as he talked with his sales manager he lamented, "I guess it just proves you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink." The manager replied, "Son, take my advice: your job is not to make him drink. Your job is to make him thirsty." And that is our job, too. That's what we are called to do. We must make a person thirsty - to understand the state of sin that we all are in and to proclaim the great news of salvation. We do this by the words that we speak, but also by the lives that we live. Our lives should be so filled with Christ that they create a thirst for

the Gospel in everyone we meet. And together, as a church, we build this thirst in others and God provides the drink. This is our job. We cannot knowingly stand by and do nothing when we have knowledge that there are people in the preverbal courtyard of life who may know the name of Jesus but who know nothing else about him.

What about the group that knew *and* followed Jesus? They had seen or at least heard about some of his miracles and maybe even participated in one, but now they stood at his trial with a choice. Were they to call for his execution or call for his freedom? The gospels make it clear that the call was greatly one-sided. None of them mention any loud disagreement or alternate plea than the one to crucify Christ. So, when they traveled to the cross, what were they hoping to see? Were they expecting some form of entertainment? Were they hoping that they would see Jesus perform one more miracle before he died? Maybe some of them were, but there were also some that knew him, that believed him to be God, and their faith was being actively challenged. How was it possible that God could even be killed? Today, we may know the backstory, but our faith still gets challenged. We know who God is and we know that Jesus is our lord. But when we face something that doesn't make sense, something that greatly challenges our faith, what do we do? Where do we turn? Do we turn towards God? Do we take a step closer to the cross and admit our confusion, ask for clarity? Or, do we walk away from it and use our own reason to make sense of our experience?

The last group is comprised of those that knew Jesus and hated him. They saw him as a danger to their way of life, to their identity in their community and so they sought to destroy him. You see, for them religion itself was the idol of their heart; religion was what they built their life around, it is what they worshiped instead of God, and so when Jesus challenged them, they responded by sending him to the cross. At times, we do the same thing. We replace God with our schedules, our goals, and our families. Our world revolves around those things and not around Jesus and when we come to worship on a Sunday morning and are challenged to introspect, to reflect on our past actions, how do we respond? Do we repent and turn back to God? Do we go home and modify our schedules to make more time for devotion, bible study, and worship? Do we modify our budgets to ensure that our first fruits are given back to him? Or do we, in a way, send him to the cross because doing so is easier than responding to Christ in the way that he wants us to?

What the Jews didn't know; what they couldn't know was that the sacrificial lamb, the lamb that took away their sins, the lamb that was used as a propitiation, was not the one that they brought with them into the temple at Jerusalem during that festival to be slain; it was the one that they sent to the cross out of hatred. "This Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" even took away theirs.

And he even takes away ours. Those times that we find it too inconvenient to introduce others to Christ, he takes away our sin. Or those times when we claim to be his disciples but then our faith is shaken in some crisis, he takes away our sin. Or the times when we have called out to him, angry about our situation or about the way that he answered our prayer, he takes away our sin. It doesn't matter what group we reflect, what mistakes we have made, or anything. All that matters is this: that we present ourselves at the cross, empty and broken, and ask him to take away our sin. And there on the cross, he does.

Please pray with me.

Lord, you have traded your perfection for our sinful nature. You have handed over to us the salvation that you earned, and we are eternally grateful. Lord strengthen us in faith to know you, to trust you, and to proclaim you to all the world.
In your name we pray. Amen.