

Undeclared by a Tree

John 19:17-30 (NIV)

¹⁷ Carrying his own cross, he went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha). ¹⁸ There they crucified him, and with him two others—one on each side and Jesus in the middle. ¹⁹ Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS. ²⁰ Many of the Jews read this sign, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the sign was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek. ²¹ The chief priests of the Jews protested to Pilate, "Do not write 'The King of the Jews,' but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews." ²² Pilate answered, "What I have written, I have written." ²³ When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. ²⁴ "Let's not tear it," they said to one another. "Let's decide by lot who will get it." This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled that said, "They divided my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment." So this is what the soldiers did. ²⁵ Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, "Woman, here is your son," ²⁷ and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home. ²⁸ Later, knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I am thirsty." ²⁹ A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips. ³⁰ When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

When was the last time that you looked forward to going to a funeral? The name itself is so connotated with awfulness that people want to not even call a funeral a funeral. We call it a celebration of life. We try to make it a happy moment when really all we want to do is forget about this death, how this loved one is not here with us. As Christians, we certainly celebrate of the blessings of the life of a fellow Christian who has died and God has taken them to heaven, but the hurt is still profoundly present. We can't pretend it's not no matter how many times we're told or say ourselves that they're in a better place, that their pain is over, etc. When we come to a funeral, we wish we could forget the death of our loved one.

Today is Good Friday, the day Jesus died. Have we come here for a funeral today? Are we here to remember the blessings of Jesus but still wish we could forget that he's not with us? We are actually here to remember. We're going to recall the gruesome, graphic details leading up to his death. It's like watching the 2004 Mel Gibson directed movie, "The Passion of the Christ." I've only ever seen it once. I appreciate it, but it makes me squeamish as a painful reminder both of what Jesus went through and that he went through all that because of all my sins.

So, why are we recounting all of Jesus' pain and suffering here on this Friday? Are we really that morbid? Who sits there and purposefully recalls all the details from someone's death? Wouldn't we rather forget all that and move on to Sunday, the much happier day? Why dwell on this death on a tree? We can't change what happened 2,000 years ago: the hatred or the verdict or the injustice or the death. Jesus was defeated by an unthinking, unfeeling tree – the cross.

Yet, every time we come here for worship, we have a replicated symbol of the tree that killed Jesus. Why gather around that for worship? Why are we here? Why remember that? Why call this Friday "good"?

We recount the details today because the details are important. Isaiah prophesied about 700 years before Jesus was crucified on a tree, and yet the detailed fulfillments of his prophecies are extraordinary! Isaiah told us that this suffering servant had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him. Jesus looked like an ordinary, typical Middle Eastern man, maybe one that you wouldn't even be able to pick out from a crowd. He was a man of suffering, familiar with pain. Jesus was struck and whipped and beaten and scourged on this Friday. He was numbered with the transgressors; Jesus was crucified between two criminals – one on his right and the other on his left. He was despised and rejected by men; Jesus was rejected by his own people as they falsely tried and convicted him and then continued to heap insults upon him and ridiculed him for being crucified as written charge on the tree read: "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." (verse 19)

In the Gospel according to John, it's a bit of a refrain throughout Jesus' time on the cross, the tree, that things happened to fulfill Scripture. John recorded that the soldiers divided Jesus' clothes by casting lots, recalling Psalm 22 written nearly 1,000 years before Jesus' crucifixion. John recorded that Jesus said that he was thirsty, which led the soldiers to give him wine vinegar. This fulfilled words from Psalm 69, again written nearly 1,000 years earlier. When they didn't break Jesus' legs but instead pierced his side to make sure that he was dead, again Scripture was fulfilled that was recorded by in multiple places by multiple authors separated by

hundreds of years, words written by Moses, David, and the prophet Zechariah. God didn't leave any details left unfulfilled, but carefully and meticulously had all of them kept while Jesus was crucified upon a tree.

But God doesn't want us to stop at just marveling at how he kept and fulfilled all the details. He wants us to see what it is that he is using this tree to do. The tree is not defeating Jesus. With the tree, we see God taking an awful instrument - something that we would normally want to shun and never see again - and uses it to give us the victory.

Paul told those living in Galatia that "all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.'" (Galatians 3:10) None of us have met this requirement. We have not always continued to do everything written in God's Book of the Law. We all failed. And we all tried again, but sadly have only seen ourselves fail again and again. Once we have broken just one of God's laws, we are guilty of breaking all of them. None of us can be right with God if we rely on what we do because none of us continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.

This leads us to see how Jesus is using this tree not for defeat but for victory. The Apostle Paul continued, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.'" (Galatians 3:13) Jesus took our place by allowing himself to be crucified on a tree. He redeemed us, meaning that he bought us back from all our sins, from all the times that we failed to continue to always do what God had told us to do. He paid the price with his death on the tree.

Again this is just as Isaiah foretold. "Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." (Isaiah 53:4-6) Jesus took it all. He completed the payment. He does not allow any of us to pay him back. He paid the price on the tree.

This means that the pain and suffering and death via the tree that we recount tonight was not meaningless or nonsensical or powerless. No, it means everything for us. This tree is now a symbol of how forgiven you and I are, of how purified you and I are from every sin, how the price has been paid, that the suffering and work for your forgiveness is already finished. This tree, this instrument of death, is now a symbol to remind us of how much God loves us. This tree now tells us that no matter how much sin plagues your mind, you are forgiven. God has paid out the wrath of your sins on Jesus. They're all gone. He's forgotten them. He became that curse so that the curse would be lifted from us. He paid the price for our straying. By his wounds we are healed. We are at peace with God because of what he did on that tree.

We're not here for a funeral today, trying to forget his death by a tree. No, God wants us to remember the tree. He wants us to remember that he used that tree to defeat our sins, to rescue us from our failures. He paid this price willingly for us so that there is nothing owed, nothing required, that he would instead give us his perfect life, his sacrificial death and credit these to us. We have a replica of that tree here to remind us of what we have because of what he endured, because of what he paid. This is not a symbol of defeat or of death or of senseless gore; it is a symbol of victory, of forgiveness, of promises meticulously, purposefully fulfilled! When we look at that cross, this tree, hear the triumphant shout of Jesus, "It is finished!" Our forgiveness is finished. Our perfection is finished. We are undefeated by the tree. Amen.