

PASSION (PALM) SUNDAY | APRIL 10, 2022

PSALM 118:1-2, 19-29 | LUKE 19:28-40

ISAIAH 50:4-9A | PSALM 31:9-16 | PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11 | LUKE 23:1-49

For Lent this year, we've been filling up our theological toolbox. Every week, we've talk about a tool we can use to get some theological work done. So far we've covered justification, law/gospel, vocation, freedom, and sinner/saint. And this week we're going to wrap up with one of the most important: theology of the cross.

Theology of the cross is a way of dealing with the question of suffering, evil, and why bad things happen. The word we use for this sometimes is "theodicy." Theodicy comes from combining the words "God" and "justice." How can a just God allow so much suffering in the world? How do we make sense of suffering, God's action, and the human condition?

One solution to this problem is what the reformers called a theology of glory. Luther summed it up as calling evil "good" and good "evil."¹ This sounds weird at first, but I imagine most of us have dealt with this. Imagine for a moment a time when something bad happened to you or someone you know. What did people say to you after it happened? Some people probably said some really helpful things that you still remember. Some people probably said some things that were sort of awkward. But they're trying, and you get it.

But you probably had some other people who tried to cheer you up with some really misguided comments. This is all a part of God's plan. God needed another angel. God doesn't close doors without opening windows. And those probably got under your skin a little bit. In addition to being cliché, they might feel hurtful and dismissive. And it's easy to see why. Because the logic underneath them all is the same. I know you think this thing that happened is bad, but I'm here to tell you it's actually good. *Yes, you got hit by a bus, but you've gained a new perspective on our nation's infrastructure.*

That's a theology of glory. Calling evil "good" and good "evil." If something bad happens to you, it's not actually bad. If you're suffering, it's because you're attached to the wrong things. How do you deal with the problem of evil? By calling evil "good." Easy.

The alternative to this is called the theology of the cross. And the reformers say that to be a theologian of the cross, you don't need a fancy degree or a bunch of books or a big dissertation. All you have to do is call something what it is. Good is good. Evil is evil.

¹ There's a good summary of the HD in Eric J. Trozzo, *Rupturing Eschatology: Divine Glory and the Silence of the Cross* (Fortress Press, 2014).

The theology of the cross upends the way we usually think about God. We often use these preconceived—almost scholastic—ideas when we talk about God. God is all-knowing. God is all-present. God is all-powerful. And we think of those characteristics as just pumped-up versions of our own experience. I know things, and God knows things the same way just more. I am present, and God is present the same way just more. And most important, I exercise power, and God exercises power the same way just more.

You notice in the gospel readings for today how people try to get Jesus to use power. The crowds envision Jesus as an imperial king. The disciples argue over who Jesus's successor will be. The soldiers ask why he won't save himself. They envision God's power as just a bigger version of their own.

The theology of the cross says that God's action, God's power, God's presence is different than mine. And it's so counter to my expectations (glory, laud, and honor), that it might as well be hidden. So that instead of starting with my preconceived ideas of what God is like and working backwards, we start with the cross. So when we ask why suffering exists when God is all-powerful, we need to figure out that divine power isn't just an extension of our own.

Jesus exercises power differently. He exercises power by continuing his ministry in the face of condemnation. He exercises power by loving God's people, even on the cross. He exercises power by instituting a new fellowship, a new community among his disciples. And he exercises power by laying down his life so that it might be taken up again. A theology of the cross says that the death is evil. But that Christ can still exercise power even in the midst of death. Jesus gives us the assurance that even death is not beyond God's grasp and empowers us to see the world, forgive the pun, cross-eyed.

When Desmond Tutu died late last year, there were, as you would expect, lots of tributes and remembrances. And one of the ones that stuck with me was from an interview he gave in 1984, before he won the Nobel Peace Prize.² And he was at a conference giving a talk on conflict resolution and nonviolence and peacemaking. And this boy comes up to him after and says, "Can you people with your eloquent talk about peaceful change show us what you have achieved with your talk? And we will show you what we have gained with a few stones." Tutu's remembers the boy saying, "Talking to whites who have become intransigent is a desperate waste of time, and the best thing is to go into the bush, get armed, get trained. And that's the only language they understand."

It would be possible to imagine Tutu responding by pulling out a McKinsey-approved strategic plan or an annual report of triumphs to report on. Something that

² Terry Gross, "Fresh Air' Remembers Archbishop Desmond Tutu," *NPR*, December 29, 2021, sec. Africa, <https://www.npr.org/2021/12/29/1068753263/fresh-air-remembers-archbishop-desmond-tutu>.

would end the argument then and there. But instead, Tutu recalls, “I did not have any evidence to show him.”

That’s sort of the point. Oftentimes the power of the theology of the cross only becomes clear in hindsight. Once Jesus is killed, the centurion realizes his power. Once apartheid was defeated, Tutu’s commitment was vindicated. But that kind of evidence isn’t always something you can point to in the moment. Sometimes it’s hidden. According to a theology of glory, the movement is a failure. But according to a theology of the cross, the movement is unspeakably powerful because it can’t be changed. Even the cross can’t stop God from being God. Even seeming defeat can’t stop Tutu from his commitment. Even when we feel like we don’t have evidence to justify the way of the cross, Jesus promises that it is there, just hidden.

It's easy to say this about Desmond Tutu, of course. Probably harder for people like you and me. But that kind of cross-eyed vision is exactly what God gives us each time we gather here around word, bath, and meal. God gives us the cross-eyed vision to resist the temptations of glory. To trust God’s presence in death. And to proclaim new life, even when it is hidden.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor