

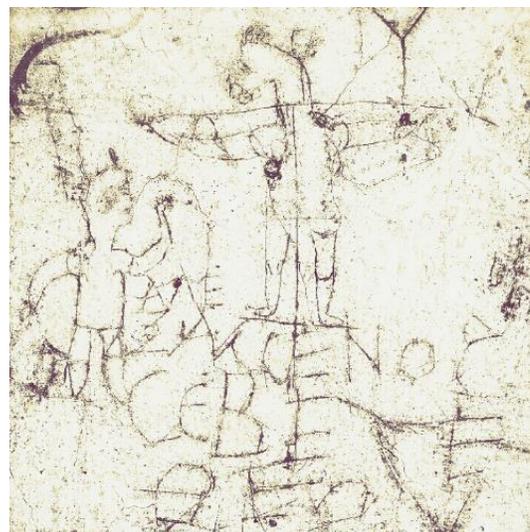
ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Sunday of the Passion (Palm Sunday) • April 14, 2019

Luke 19:28-40 • Isaiah 50:4-9a • Psalm 31:9-16 • Philippians 2:5-11 • Luke 23:33-49

In the nineteenth century, a group of archeologists excavating the ruins of a building in Rome made a startling discovery.¹ Carved into the wall of a room where slaves were kept, they discovered one of the earliest depictions of Jesus that we have. It is believed to date back to the second century. It is about twelve inches tall and twelve wide. And it is not flattering.

The graffiti depicts a man with his hands stretched out as if in prayer. Next to him, looking down at him, is a man with the head of a donkey being crucified. Below the image, an inscription reads, “ALE / XAMENOS / SEBETE / THEON.” Or *Alexamenos worships God*. So one of the first depictions of Jesus that we have is not from a pious artist painting prayerfully in a studio. It is from one of Alexamenos’ fellow slaves who found his Christian beliefs so idiotic that he carved a donkey-headed Christ into the wall where everyone could see it.



Alexamenos Graffito
Palatine Antiquarium (Rome)

The image lets us infer something about how Christians were viewed in second-century Rome. (Not well.) But when we jump right to what the image tells us about how Christians were viewed, we miss something very obvious and very profound about the image itself and what it tells us about God.

We take it for granted today that crosses are a symbol of Christianity. If you want to communicate that something is related to Jesus, you put a cross on it. But Christians only adopted the cross as a symbol of their faith sometime around the fourth century. At the time Alexamenos’ fellow slave drew this donkey-headed Christ in the second century, no Christian would have used a cross as a symbol of their beliefs. It was too soon. Crosses were still being used. They weren’t the abstract symbols they would later become.

And yet, when this artist wanted to depict the Christian God, he knew exactly what to draw. Not Jesus feeding the five thousand or raising Lazarus from the dead or teaching the Beatitudes. No, Jesus on a cross. Alexamenos’ God was a crucified God. The depiction is not flattering. But it’s exactly right.

So why does it matter that Jesus was crucified? We’re so used to hearing this language that it’s easy to breeze through it without thinking about it. One of the absolutions that we frequently use in worship begins with this sentence: “In the mercy of almighty God, Jesus Christ was given to die for us, and for his sake God forgives us all our sins.” That little sentence leads us to at least three major questions. What does it mean that Jesus was *given* to die? What does it mean that Jesus was given to die *for us*? And what does Jesus’s *death* have to do with God forgiving us all our *sins*?

Those are big questions. And the answers to them are even bigger. When the authors of the New Testament try to make sense of Jesus’s death, they don’t come up with one single answer on

¹ Oliver Larry Yarbrough, “The Alexamenos Graffito,” in *Engaging the Passion: Perspectives on the Death of Jesus*, ed. Oliver Larry Yarbrough (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 233.

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what it means. They offer us a number of images. And so this morning, I want to give you just one perspective on what Jesus's death means and what it does.

In today's first gospel reading, we heard the story of Jesus's entrance into Jerusalem. The crowd greets Jesus with palm branches and shouts of "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." Except you may have noticed that in Luke's gospel the crowd doesn't shout, "Hosanna!" And they don't shout, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" Instead, the crowd shouts, "Blessed is the king!"

Luke wants to make clear what this crowd wants from Jesus is an equal to the powers that be. Someone who can dislodge the ruling class and rule benevolently. Jesus has been peaceful and loving and just and merciful in his ministry thus far, but now things are going to have to be different. Jesus is going to have to change. What they likely expect is liberation gained by force, renewal gained by hostility, and freedom gained by oppression.

And yet, Jesus does not change. When Jesus has a chance to abandon his ministry before things go downhill, he doesn't take it. When Jesus has a chance to start a political revolution against Pilate, he doesn't take it. When Jesus has a chance to react violently to Herod's attacks, he doesn't take it. And then, of course, there's the striking moment we heard in today's second gospel reading. While Jesus is being crucified, he prays, "Father, forgive them." Whenever Jesus is met with evil during his passion, he responds with love. He doesn't change.

This is part of what the crowd that welcomes Jesus into Jerusalem misunderstands. That crowd, like us, is stuck in relationships and systems that change how we act and lead us to do things that don't reflect our beliefs or interests. When we do something that doesn't reflect our character, we often do we say that someone else "made me do it" or "made me feel this way." We don't feel totally free to be in the world because so much of our lives is responding and reacting to the world other people have created for us.

We are caught up in cycles of violence. We have global conflicts that seem stuck in a constant cycle where someone else started it and everyone claims to be acting in self-defense. Many people in abusive relationships are stuck in a cycle of tension, violence, and remorse that repeats over and over. Sometimes those cycles even stretch over generations. Many of us know people who were abused as children and grew up to be abusers themselves. We are caught up in exchanges of power. We treat other people better when they seem to have something to offer us. Or we feel beholden to people because we owe them something. We act against our own character to satisfy other people. Those cycles and exchanges change us.

So part of what the cross reveals to us is God's freedom.² God isn't subject to the cycles of violence and exchanges of power that control our lives. God is going to go on loving, forgiving, healing, reconciling people whether we want God to or not. No matter what we do, no matter how far to the edge we push God, outside the city, up on a cross, we discover that God acts the same. We can't change God's mind or get God to act in a way that doesn't reflect God's character. In other words, what the death of Jesus reveals, is that Jesus's purpose, his mission, his love, his connection with the one he calls his Father, cannot be killed. Even when presented with the very worst that we are capable of, even when we have reached the very limits of how far we can push God away, God is still God.

So getting back to the original question, how does Jesus's death bring us back into relationship with God the right way? And hopefully you can see the tension here. If the whole point

² This is laid out well in Rowan Williams, *The Sign and the Sacrifice: The Meaning of the Cross and the Resurrection* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016).

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of God's freedom is that God's character doesn't change based on what we do, then how does God's freedom change our relationship with God?

Well, what God's freedom reveals to us is that this is a God who can be trusted. The fact that Jesus's life and his passion reflect the same commitment and values, even at the very extreme of human evil, means that Jesus's life and God's life have integrity. They hang together. They are what they say they are. They can be depended on. In other words, there is no God "behind" God with other opinions about us and other inclinations toward us. What we encounter in Jesus's passion is the complete revelation of God's character. A God who doesn't just love when it's convenient or forgive when it's easy or seek reconciliation when it's comfortable. But a God who chooses to love and forgive and reconcile no matter what. The pouring out of God's very self to the point where there is nothing left for God to hide behind. This is a God you can trust.

And yet, we know how hard it is to trust. We trust that people have our best interests at heart, and later on we find out that they're just looking out for themselves. We trust that other people love us for who we are, and then we find out that they only love part of us. We trust that people mean what they say, and then we find out that they were lying to us the whole time.

And what's the word we used to describe those people? Two faced. There was a part of them that we didn't see. That there was this other aspect of them that was hidden and now it's been revealed to us, but it's too late. If only we'd known it was there all along, we wouldn't have trusted them.

In the death of Jesus, especially in his act of forgiving from the cross, we see that there is no other face. This is it. This is God. In the face of the crucified Jesus, we see nothing less than the likeness of the Trinity poured out into this one, singular human life. This is who God is. This is what God does. God never turns away from us. This is a God you can trust.

In his painting of Christ's Entombment from 1554, the Italian painter Moretto da Brescia depicts Mary clutching the body of Jesus as he is laid in his tomb. Surrounded by rich colors and fabrics, Christ's face and skin are startlingly gray, devoid of any life. On Christ's tombstone is an inscription from Philippians 2, which we heard earlier this morning: "He... became obedient unto death." Obedience meaning not that Jesus met some arbitrary set of standards laid out by God, but that Jesus' life has perfectly revealed the heart of God's character and action and being.

The face of the crucified Jesus tells you something. Perhaps that's why Alexamenos' fellow slave was comfortable drawing a naked man crucified on a cross, but chose not to depict Jesus's face. Because it's hard to look at the face of the crucified one. The face makes a claim on us. The face tells us that there is no God behind this God. The face tells us that this is a God we can trust. The face tells us that no matter how far we push God away, outside the city, up on a cross, God is still God.



The Entombment

Moretto da Brescia (1554)

Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York City)

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