



Sermon Bearing the Unbearable

I don't know about you, but before I take a trip, I like to look at a map to see the big picture, to see the route from 30,000 feet. Somehow, seeing the whole route helps me make sense of all the stops along the way.

We're entering Holy Week, the final leg of our Lenten journey, and the most significant part of the journey. This week we'll walk with Jesus through the last week of his life. We'll stop at the upper room where Jesus will share a Passover meal, his last supper with his disciples. We'll enter the darkness of Good Friday, and eventually arrive at the celebration of the empty tomb.

That's a lot to take in in a single week. So today we're going to look at the whole map, the entirety of God's journey with humanity from beginning to end, in the hopes that it will help us make more sense of this week's journey.

The journey begins with creation. God creates the heavens and the earth, and God creates Adam and Eve, and places them in a beautiful garden. While Christians love to argue about the "how" of creation, we rarely ask the question "why." Why does God create the heavens and the earth and the animals and human beings?

The answer, simply put, is love. God is love, and all of creation is intended to embody God's love. God exists from the beginning as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, a community of love. The relationship between Adam and Eve, their relationship with God, and their relationship to the beautiful garden is a reflection of God's great love.

But something happens in that beautiful garden. The serpent plants seeds of doubt into the minds of Adam and Eve, causing them to doubt God's love and goodness. And that doubt, that insecurity, drives them to eat from the forbidden tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In essence, Adam and Eve choose to try to be their own god and, in that moment, everything changes. Relationship is broken. Adam and Eve realize that they are naked, and they are ashamed and cover themselves. They come to fear God, and hide from him. The beautiful garden now produces weeds and thorns. Sin breaks relationship. Sin shatters our lives and all of creation. This isn't just Adam and Eve's story. It's ours. The real power of this story is not that it once happened, but that it happens over and over again, in your life and in mine.

Sin has created a crisis that we cannot solve on our own. We doubt God's love and goodness, and so we turn away from God and live on our own terms. Rather than cherish one another and use things, we cherish things and use one another. And, try as we might, we cannot fix what is broken in this world, and in our lives. We are, as the old liturgy says, in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.

But God has not given up on us. God pursues us in love. God comes in human flesh in Jesus.

At around the age of 30, Jesus is ready to begin his public ministry. In each of the Gospels, that begins with his baptism. Sensing that God is up to something new, people from all over the countryside

come to be baptized by John, repenting of their sins, turning their lives to God. And among them is Jesus. In baptism, Jesus identifies with our humanity. But the most remarkable part of Jesus' baptism happens when he comes up out of the water. The sky opens and Jesus sees the heavens. The Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, descends upon Jesus, anointing and empowering him for his mission. And then the voice of God is heard:

While all humanity struggles with doubt about God's love and goodness, Jesus knows from the start to whom he belongs. *"This is my beloved Son; with him I am well pleased."*

If Jesus' baptism is, in part, an affirmation of God's love for him, why is it that, in each Gospel account, the very next thing that happens is the Holy Spirit driving Jesus out into the wilderness to be tempted? The answer lies back in the beautiful garden.

Have you ever noticed how similar Jesus' encounter with Satan in the wilderness is to Adam and Eve's encounter with the serpent in the garden? In the garden, the serpent plants seeds of doubt into Adam and Eve, doubt about God's goodness, tempting Adam and Eve to seek to be self-sufficient, rejecting God's love and goodness. And that's exactly what Satan seeks to do with Jesus in the wilderness.

Satan seeks to cast doubt about the voice that Jesus had heard from heaven at his baptism, but Jesus will have none of it. He chooses to trust God's love and goodness, to live dependent upon God. In other words, where Adam and Eve fail, Jesus succeeds, which is the Gospel's way of foreshadowing that what was broken in the beautiful garden will be healed in Jesus.

Baptized by John and affirmed by the Father, Jesus moves through the temptations in the wilderness by trusting in God's love and goodness, refusing to allow Satan to plant seeds of doubt. Now, Jesus is prepared for his public ministry. *(Music cue for intro to song.)*

Now, Jesus enters the cities and the towns of Galilee, preaching, teaching, healing and casting out demons. He is unlike anyone they have ever heard or seen before. He speaks with an authority that they have never before experienced. His word has power. Little do they know that he *is* the Word of God, the One who spoke creation into being.

Jesus brings a message of God's love and forgiveness to those who think God could never love them. And that message changes people. It sets them free. It begins to heal their original insecurity. How is it possible that someone could know all of their failures and love them still? Could God know it all, and still love and forgive them? Those who believe Jesus' message are then sent out to live love, mercy and grace toward others. Jesus both models what it means to live in the Kingdom as well as setting people free and empowering them for Kingdom living.

But Jesus also preaches a message of warning to those who think they don't need God's love and forgiveness. Those who think their birthright or their obedience to the law make them right with God

are condemned. The deeper truth is that living that way is its own condemnation, because it means living in the way of Adam and Eve. It means living in bondage and brokenness. And it brought Jesus to tears. It still does.

After three years of teaching and healing, and forgiving and loving, Jesus sets his sights on Jerusalem. The Gospels tell us that he knows what awaits him there, but he goes anyway. By the time he enters Jerusalem, his fame has spread far and wide. Because it is the time of the Passover celebration, thousands of pilgrims from around the country have come into Jerusalem to celebrate and worship. And many of them, upon hearing that Jesus is coming, gather to welcome him. They are curious. They are excited. They are hopeful.

And so they line the streets as Jesus enters the city. They wave palm branches, in much the same way that you and I might wave a flag at a parade. And they shout “Hosanna!” – a word which means “Save!” You see, at the heart of the people’s excitement – at the very center of it all – is the hope that this man, this Jesus, is the Messiah, God’s chosen servant who will come with power, break the back of the Roman government, and set the Jews free from their oppression. But while Jesus is indeed the Messiah, he has come to set them free from far more than the Romans. He comes to heal what was broken in the beautiful garden.

Jesus enters Jerusalem on a Sunday. That Thursday he joins his disciples in an upper room to celebrate the Passover. The Passover is a time to remember God’s love and power that freed the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt. Little did the disciples know that God’s love and power would soon free them, and all of creation, from their bondage to sin.

At that same supper he washes his disciples’ feet, a reminder that the Son of Man comes not to be served, but to serve others. And then he gives them a new commandment: to love one another as he has loved them.

It is *how* Jesus loves them that the disciples misunderstand. No matter how often Jesus tells them that he has come to Jerusalem to suffer and to die, they simply don’t understand. While they know he has come to love them to life, they don’t understand that, in order to do that, he will need to love them to death ... death on a cross.

After the supper, Jesus leads his disciples to yet another garden, this one at Gethsemane. Leaving his disciples to pray, Jesus goes deeper into the garden and faces temptation yet again. Will he drink the cup of suffering and death, or not? Will he trust God’s goodness and love, and accomplish salvation God’s way, or will he turn from God, rely on himself, and do things his own way? He has a choice, but as he did in the wilderness, Jesus chooses to trust in God. “Not my will, but yours be done.”

Jesus says “yes” to God’s way, and that way leads him to the cross. And that raises at least two questions. First, why is Jesus killed? On one hand, the Romans execute Jesus to keep peace with the Jews. An angry mob is crying out for his execution. It is the expedient thing to do.

On the other hand, the religious leaders want him killed because he poses a threat to their power. Proclaiming forgiveness to people who don’t think they need to be forgiven makes them angry. Announcing the spectacularly inclusive love of God for all people makes those in power feel less important. Not to mention the fact that Jesus doesn’t live according to the rules; he lives according to love. That’s why Jesus is killed.

But the second question is far more important: why does Jesus die? What is God up to on the cross? One word: atonement.

Of all the fancy words that fill theology books, “atonement” is about the only one that comes straight out of the English language. And it means exactly what it says: “at-one-ment.” In Jesus’ death and resurrection, God is fixing, restoring, making one that which was broken way back in the beautiful garden – our relationship with God, with one another, and with all of creation.

On the cross, God shows us just how far God is willing to go to proclaim God’s unconditional love and forgiveness, so that we might no longer live doubting God’s love and forgiveness. This is the sacrifice that saves us from sin, from our turning away from God and one another.

This is God’s story. This is our story. It’s a story that begins with a tree in a beautiful garden where people doubt God and run from God. And it moves to yet another tree, on a hill call Golgotha, where God proclaims in actions so clear that they cannot be mistaken, that we and all of creation are loved beyond measure, and forgiven beyond reason.

But the story doesn’t end there. We now live in the hope of that day when God will finally and fully make all things new, when God creates a new city – the new Jerusalem. And in the middle of that city there will be yet another tree, “the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations” (Revelation 22:2).

Why did Jesus die? For all of this. For all of us. This is God’s story. This is our story. It’s life between two trees. It really is the greatest story ever told.

I want to invite you walk the story together this week. Let’s worship together as a family of faith. Come Thursday evening and join Jesus at the Last Supper. And come on Friday to the foot of the cross. It will not be an easy journey. It will require your time, and it will require you to honestly look into the face of the One who loves you more than you can imagine, as he gives his life away.

It would be tempting to just skip from Palm Sunday right to Easter, but if we skip the Last Supper and the cross, we’ll miss some important things that God longs to whisper into our hearts and lives. I promise you: if you’ll walk this journey this week, if you’ll give yourself to worship on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, you’ll experience the joy of Easter in a whole new way.

Jesus walks this journey to the cross for you, and me, and all of creation, so that Easter might hold the promise of life. Let’s experience the story together this week.