

## The Wood Between the Worlds

This coming Wednesday marks the beginning of the season of Lent according to the historic church calendar. And to lean into Lent together, on Wednesday evening we'll be hosting our first-ever one-church **Ash Wednesday** service at 6:30pm at our St. Catharines location, and we hope you'll be able to join us. But even before Lent officially begins, today we're launching a new message series that's going set up and then carry us all the way through Lent, from now until Easter – eight weeks focused on one thing: the cross of Christ.

The idea for this series actually comes from this really beautiful book by pastor and theologian, Brian Zahnd, called *The Wood Between the Worlds* – poetically suggesting that the wooden cross of Christ represents *the* connecting point between the world of heaven and the world of earth – an idea we'll reflect on and explore together as we go. But the reason we want to dedicate eight weeks to this series and spend the entire season of Lent looking at and contemplating the cross is because, whether we've realized it or not, according to the scriptures, the death of Jesus Christ on the cross is the most multi-faceted, multi-layered, multi-symbolic event of human history – *the crux* of the story, if you will – marking an eternal before and after, making it worth examining and exploring in a never-ending fashion. As Brian Zahnd says, like turning a theological kaleidoscope, ever-revealing a new glimpse of wonder and beauty and meaning. This is why the Apostle Paul declared, when speaking to the mystery of the good news of Jesus to some early Christians, in **1 Corinthians 2:2**:

***For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.***

That somehow, while Paul sought to share and explain the good news of Jesus, resolving to know nothing but Christ crucified on the cross was, not just *enough* to explain the good news of Jesus to the Corinthians, but was actually *more than enough* to fully encounter, experience, and eternally come to know the God who has been revealed in Jesus.

But I think the question for *us* at the outset of this series is: What if, *in our world*, we've actually become *too* familiar with the cross? Whether you consider yourself religious or not. What if, in our world, the cross has become more cliché than compelling? And if that's the case, how might we have been missing the full wonder of *the wood between the worlds*?

Think about this for a moment: Did you know that the cross is the most replicated symbol and image in history? From the most obvious places of ***churches and cathedrals***, to ***military*** emblems and badges, to ***gravesides***, to ***hospitals***, to ***charitable organizations***, to ***schools***, to countless ***paintings and artistic expressions***, and maybe most wide-spread, to the ***necklaces and chains*** that billions of people wear every day, carrying this image and symbol of the cross, that – regardless of your beliefs – we all immediately recognize as familiar. And while for many, the cross represents some kind of warm or comforting feeling, for others, it's become nothing more than a benign, or even baggage-laden, religious symbol. But what I want us to consider today at the start of this series, is that regardless of whichever familiar response to the cross you relate to, before the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth, no one would have ever thought of or seen the cross in any of these familiar or cliché ways.

To help us start to appreciate this, I want to invite us to reflect for a moment on two, what I think will be, *unfamiliar* images of the cross – one that is modern, almost futuristic; and one that is ancient, long before anyone decided to buy their significant-other a sparkly cross necklace. Both of these come from Brian Zahnd's reflections in *The Wood Between the Worlds*, and the first, I'll disclaim is a bit profane and could feel religiously offensive at first, but please bear with me, because I think it's also profound. ***Check it out...*** The image is of two space aliens arriving for their first time on earth and encountering a life-size crucifix of Jesus. And what's *their* immediate response? One saying to the other: "*You know what we need to do? We need to get the 'bleep' out of here, that's what we need to do!*" Cause any planet that does this to one of their own is not a safe place! That this cross is quite startling!

And although the cartoon is somewhat profane and could perhaps feel offensive, I wonder if, in a way we've never considered, it can freshly alert us to how shocking, unsettling, and unsafe the idea of a naked man nailed to a wooden cross really is! And yet somehow this has still become the most replicated image and symbol in our history. Why is that?!

Now for the ancient image... This one comes from around AD 200, said to be one of the earliest depictions referring to Jesus on the cross, when someone scratched graffiti art on a plaster wall in ancient Rome, intended to mock a Christian they knew named **Alexamenos**. In sloppy Greek, the inscription says, "**Alexamenos worships his god**". But what you can see most clearly in the graffiti is that the "god" – referring to Jesus – that Alexamenos is worshipping has the head of a donkey. Because whoever this early crucifixion-graffiti-artist was, they clearly thought that anyone worshipping a man hung on a cross might as well be worshipping a donkey, and therefore, should be mocked as a donkey – *or another word for donkey* – themselves.

Friends, these two *unfamiliar* images actually return us to a sense of how the cross was experienced and encountered by the world of the earliest Jesus followers, long before anyone could have thought of it as an overly-familiar benign religious cliché.

And this is exactly how the Apostle Paul put it in his same letter to the Corinthians about the good news of the cross of Christ, when he wrote (**1 Corinthians 1:23 NLT**):

***So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended and the Gentiles say it's all nonsense.***

Offense and nonsense... Paul says that for the first-century Jewish people who had been faithfully waiting for a Messiah to come and rescue them from Roman oppression, Jesus of Nazareth who was executed by Roman crucifixion was an absolute offense to their religious sensibilities and faithful expectations of who their Messiah should be!

And for Roman Gentiles who were watching this rag-tag group of Jesus-followers now declare that the Jesus of Nazareth who was killed on a cross was their God and Saviour, worthy of worship and devotion, thought it utter foolishness and a donkey of a religion!

You see, in *their* world, actual *crucifixion* on crosses was what was familiar. And Jesus of Nazareth wasn't the first Galilean to be crucified. No, in the first century, Roman crucifixion was appallingly common. In fact, around the time Jesus would've been a young boy, there's record of the Romans crucifying over 6,000 Galileans in a single day, sending the loud and clear and terrifying message of what happened when you tried to stand up to the Roman empire, through their well-executed instrument of human torture and imperial terror that was the cross. Even Jesus himself was but one of three crucified on Good Friday!

But what was different about the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth?

Paul goes on to say (**1 Corinthians 1:24 NLT**):

***But to those called by God to salvation, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ [crucified] is the power of God and the wisdom of God.***

That though the cross of Christ was seen as an offense to the Jews and utter nonsense to the Gentiles, Paul declares that to those who were trusting in and experiencing the miraculous saving work of Jesus, the cross of Christ had somehow now actually revealed the power and wisdom of God. That somehow everything that could be known of the omnipotence and omniscience of the God of the universe was somehow revealed in the offensive nonsense of the cross. Like a mysterious *wood between the worlds* of heaven and earth – God and people – shockingly opening our eyes and world to be able to see and know and encounter the very power and wisdom and character of the God of the universe.

And this is exactly what Paul claimed was happening in and through Christ on the cross, in a parallel passage to the Colossians, where he wrote (**Colossians 1:19-20**):

***For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ, and through him God reconciled everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ's blood on the cross.***

That through that which was an offense to the highly religious and utter nonsense to the irreligious, God had now fully embodied and revealed God's self in Jesus, and was reconciling all things through Christ cross.

Brian Zahnd writes about this shocking revelation this way, saying:

***Being disguised under the disfigurement of an ugly crucifixion and death, Christ upon the cross is paradoxically the clearest revelation of who God is.***

I think that's so profound, I want to read it for us once more...

Friends, this is the point of this series. That through what may have become the most replicated and familiar and for many, cliché, symbol and image in human history – *the cross* – we actually have the shocking opportunity to see and discover and come to know the fullest and clearest revelation of the God of the universe. The God who gave his life on *the wood between the worlds*. And that's what we want to explore over these eight weeks of Lent.

And so, if you're wondering whether this series is for you, when it comes a God revealed on a cross, if you've ever wondered whether God can forgive you, I think *The Wood Between the Worlds* series is especially for you. Or if you've ever asked where God is in a world full of pain and brokenness, I think *The Wood Between the Worlds* series is absolutely for you. Or if you've ever wished there was a way we could take legitimate steps toward world peace, I think *The Wood Between the Worlds* series is for you. Or if you've ever doubted whether God could really be a God of love – at least, a God who loves you – I think this series is for you. Or if you're anxious over polarization and power-hungry politics that bombard us day after day, once again, I think this series is for you. And most of all, if you've ever feared that death is the end of our story, making life hopeless or meaningless or hardly worth living, friends, I am convinced that this series and the cross of Christ is absolutely for you.

Because while we're spending these eight weeks focusing on *the cross* as *The Wood Between the Worlds*, there's one more feature of the cross that's made the cross of Christ the most iconic and recognized and familiar symbol in human history: and that is, *resurrection*.

Because every time we talk about *resolving to know nothing but Christ crucified*, or *God reconciling all things through Christ upon the cross*, we talk about it that way only because of the good news and hope of *the resurrection* of Jesus. In fact, Brian Zahnd would say, the only reason we've even heard of Jesus of Nazareth is because of the claim of his resurrection. Paul wrote about it this way, saying (**1 Corinthians 15:14**):

***If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.***

Or put another way, if something *didn't* happen through Jesus of Nazareth on Easter Sunday, he would've been just one more of the hundreds of thousands of would-be Messiahs crucified on crosses at the hands of the Romans, lost and forgotten in history like all the rest. But the fact that this horrifying symbol of human torture and imperial terror from the most powerful empire in history has now become the most familiar and symbolic and, for many, most comforting image in history, suggests that maybe there's something different about this first-century Jew from Galilee, who not only gave up his life to death on a cross, but who's followers for nearly two millennia have claimed that he's risen and alive again today!

And while we're not going to rush to Easter, taking our time – one week at a time – to turn the kaleidoscope of the cross in our journey through Lent, don't forget that Easter is coming, and that every time we say "*Christ crucified*" we declare "*Christ crucified and risen!*"

Friends, my invitation to you this Easter season – this Lent – is to not let the cross be cliché. But to be struck by the scandal and foolishness of its claim. And then to contemplate its wonder and mystery. And most of all, to dive deeply into what it means for us and our world if the wood of the cross is where we see and discover the clearest revelation of who God is, the God who gave his life on the cross that has become *the wood between the worlds*.

And to help us lean into this mystery throughout this series, a bit different from our usual routine and practice, we're going to receive communion together in every week throughout this series. Communion – or *the Lord's Supper* – is the experience and encounter, originally as a full meal, that Jesus initiated with his followers to remember and represent his sacrifice on the cross. Saying to his original followers, *'This bread... This bread represents my body given for you. This cup... This wine or juice represents my blood shed for you. Do this in remembrance of me. And I will be with you always, in and through everything along the way.'*

And so we want to receive communion together, the bread and the juice, week after week throughout Lent to remember and encounter the revelation of God and the saving work of Christ on the cross. And beyond simply remembering, in a way that I can't fully explain, Jesus promised to especially be present to us in this experience. That somehow we have the opportunity to meet Jesus here at the communion table. To meet and encounter the God revealed in Jesus who gave his body and blood on the cross.

For communion at Southridge, we serve gluten-free bread and alcohol-free juice so everyone's able to participate. And when you receive communion, our servers will say, *"The body of Christ broken for you. The blood of Christ shed for you."* And in response, you're invited to receive and eat a piece of bread and drink a cup of juice. As far as who can come, we practice an open-table invitation to communion in the same way Jesus practiced an open-table life when he walked the earth.

So please hear this communion invitation from Brian Zahnd that I'd like to read for us:

***This is the table – not of the church – but of the Lord. It is made ready for those who love him and those who want to love him more. So come, you who have much faith and you who have little; you who have been here often and you who have not been here long; you who have tried to follow and you who have failed. Come. Because it's the Lord's will that those who want him shall meet him here.***

***The body of Christ broken for you. The blood of Christ shed for you.***

I'll pray and then we're invited to receive communion in all our locations...