

*Carry-on Baggage Only*  
*God at Work In Us: Crucifixion and Resurrection*  
John 12:24-25

Call to Worship

It is a primal drive, of all human beings, to overcome our sense of aloneness, our isolation and separateness. Every spiritual tradition recognizes this truth. We know this too—only we are not always so conscious about it. Sometimes we seek a sense of union through overwork, in alcohol or drugs, or by clinging to unhealthy relationships.

But the very essence of what we long for is to absorb ourselves in a great love; to serve one another, and to serve something beyond ourselves. To know that we are not alone, but we are part of a great, flowing river; a higher purpose.

It is when we find—sometimes stumble upon—a sense of oneness, with another person, with our work, with our God, that we feel most alive, most fully human.

This is what faith offers: a way out of our self-centered isolation, our stubborn insistence that no one else could possibly understand us. The reminder that we are not alone.

“Come,” God said. “Draw near to me, and I will give you my heart, a passion for love.”  
Jesus said, “Let me show you. This is what that love looks like.”

We are thinking together in this season about the beliefs that are essential to our faith, the convictions that shape us; so necessary—and so few—that we can carry them everywhere with us, in the smallest suitcase, the bag that requires us to pay no extra baggage fees. Perhaps this is one of those essentials.

We come, our God. We come to be freed from our self-centeredness, to be bound—to you, and to one another.

And we sing, because it helps us find our voice, and to link it with others in our common gratitude for life.

Will you stand, in body or in spirit—and let us sing.

## Sermon

I'm not the first person who thought it might be helpful to try to compress two thousand years of theology into something you can carry around in a backpack. In 1952, Bill Bright, the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, did something similar. He wrote and published a little book called *The Four Spiritual Laws*. Maybe you've seen it. Maybe you even had one of those booklets yourself. I did. Those four laws said pretty much what I learned was the essence of Christianity in the evangelical tradition that grabbed me in high school and held onto me through college.

When I was 13, I went to a Young Life weekend camp. Late that Saturday night, just after we all heard the speaker tell the story of Jesus' awful death on the cross, I went off by myself and prayed the prayer they told me to, the classic 'sinner's prayer'. I thanked God that Jesus went through all that pain for me, to save me from my 13-year lifetime of sinning. And then I did the only thing a guilty, grateful sinner can do: I gave my life back to God. Invited Jesus into my heart.

I'd grown up in a church, but I'd never heard the story put quite so personally. I was a convert. I'm grateful for the experience Young Life offered me. It formed my faith in lots of ways that are still part of me. But my youthful zeal led me to do some pretty embarrassing things in my fresh-convert years.

The year I was in twelfth grade and my sisters were a few years younger, our family's dishwasher broke. My mom decided that a broken dishwasher presented a great opportunity for her girls to learn to wash dishes the old-fashioned way. So for almost a year, my sisters and I shared dish duty every night after dinner. One night, my middle sister Patti, who was about thirteen at the time, was drying while I was washing. There we were, together at the kitchen sink, which seemed to me the perfect opportunity to convince her that she needed the same kind of conversion that I'd had. I don't remember exactly what I said, or whether I actually put her in a headlock, but I wouldn't let her leave the sink until she prayed the prayer I led her in, word for word, invited Jesus into her life too. This is my sister who has never felt the need to go to church since then. No wonder.

I'd like to think I would never try to strong-arm anyone into my version of Christianity again. But maybe I should ask you about that.

No matter what version of Christianity you come from, I think probably we have all been told at one time or another, "Christ died for our sins." That is a statement, a piece of theology, that sits right at the center of Christian doctrine. But do you have a clear picture of what that means? Or how it works, exactly?

The theological word for what Jesus' crucifixion accomplished is 'atonement'. It comes from a Greek word that means 'reconciliation'. Somehow, what happened on the cross brought humans and God together, made it possible for us to meet after we'd grown distant from one another. The precise mechanics of that wasn't a major issue to the earliest Christians. In the first few hundred years, as they worked out the essential beliefs of this new religion that had Jesus Christ at its center, there were lots of debates and arguments, about lots of things. This wasn't one of the

issues they argued about. It's not that the crucifixion wasn't important. Rather, there were lots of different beliefs and understandings about what Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection meant.

And that was true until about 1000 CE. And then a theologian named Anselm developed what has been called, ever since then, the *substitution* theory of atonement. What most Western Christians have heard or believed since then is some version of Anselm's thinking. Here's how it works: God is holy, perfect. Humans are not. Ever since Adam and Eve, humans have shown themselves to be incapable of doing what they're supposed to do, obeying God's laws, doing justice, living the way God wants them to. Because justice is at the core of who God is, this theory says, God can't just let humans off the hook for sinning, because that would be unjust. So for all these years—generations—that we haven't been living holy lives, there's a debt to God that's stacking up, an IOU that's been accumulating, a punishment humanity deserves. In the cosmic system of justice, God has to demand payment.

This was a dilemma for God, because God loves us. And so, God sent his perfect Son to earth, the only human being who ever lived a perfect life. Jesus sacrificed himself, volunteered to die on the cross, to pay the debt that humankind owes God. He substituted himself for us in the sentence God should have pronounced on us. His death was the punishment we deserve—for our own sins, and for the sins of our human siblings. And Jesus' sacrifice was enough to satisfy God, Anselm said. Jesus paid off the debt—not only for all the sins that regular people had committed up until then, but all the sins all of us together would ever commit. Because of what Jesus did for us, God can love us again, see right past our guilt, because when God looks at us and would otherwise be inclined to be angry or disappointed in us, Jesus steps in and says, 'I've already taken care of that.'

That theory of atonement has been the central piece of Protestant Christianity for a very long time. It's made sense to thousands and thousands of people. It has saved people's lives, turned them around, led them to lives of faith, helped them find forgiveness. It's the story that made sense to me when I was thirteen.

And for some people, that story makes no sense at all. Is it possible that the same God who made us and loves us and who, in every story of the Bible seeks out and pursues lost, rebellious, deeply flawed human beings, would be angry about those same people being imperfect? Does it seem right that the God who created everything and who put in place the laws of the universe wasn't allowed to forgive people for thousands of years and can only do it now with some elaborate legal theory and human sacrifice?

Maybe you've made peace with that traditional doctrine of atonement by saying, 'Well, I like the teachings of Jesus, and I admire his willingness to die for what he believed in, but I can't figure out the rest of that story.' I understand that. I don't want to carry around an extra bag of beliefs that don't match the goodness and generosity and freedom of the God I believe in. You don't have to carry that baggage around either. But I also don't want us to ignore Jesus' crucifixion, that Good Friday moment that is the central drama in the Christian story. If we do that, we're missing something important. It's kind of like getting on the plane and forgetting to pack your toothbrush.

I want to offer you this morning another way to make sense of the importance of Jesus' death, the story of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection that came afterward.

What if, when we say 'Christ died for our sins,' we mean something else? What if 'sin' isn't God's tally of our wrong actions, or rule violations, or bad behaviors? What if, instead, the sin that separates us from God is more like a condition, almost like a chronic disease? Maybe the thing that keeps us from being the fully-human beings we were created to be is our ambivalence about being in relationship. We need each other, and still we insist on separating ourselves; we stubbornly refuse connection. We hold ourselves apart—from God, from one another.

We choose—I choose—all the time, I think, not to notice the possibility of love and grace that is right there, hovering just under the surface of things, waiting for me to take hold and draw it out. I turn away from making a connection because I'm afraid. I can't see the need in someone else's eyes because my eyes are turned toward myself—to what I need, the way she just disappointed me, the illness or pain that keep my head down. Maybe the harsh words we say and the unfeeling things we do, all the ways we communicate 'I don't need you' or 'I don't owe you anything,'—maybe those are just symptoms of the loneliness and isolation we carry inside of us, and sometimes nurture. Is it possible that every evil in the world grows from that cut-off-ness? Is that our sin, the human condition that wrestles with our best intentions and makes it so hard for us to love God, and each other?

Maybe that's the sadness Jesus felt at that ultimately human moment when he died. Maybe it was the full weight of our aloneness he was feeling when he cried, "My God, why have you forsaken me?"

The God who showed up in human life because he saw that is not an angry God, needing to be paid. That's a God who says, 'I know. I feel it too. If you can't come to me, I will come to you.' We need the crucifixion because it holds God's promise to always come and find us, no matter how lost we have gotten, how separated we have become.

But crucifixion is only half of this story of God identifying with us. One side of a two-sided coin, the inhale that needs an exhale to complete a breath. The other half of the story is resurrection, the Easter story, the story that says maybe life is something bigger, longer, more persistent than we thought. The possibility that life survives even death, the separation we fear most.

Maybe you have thought about resurrection the same way you've thought about Jesus' crucifixion—that you don't really need this part of the story, that life after death is not something that you are particularly worried about or hungry for.

A few years ago a number of theologically trained scholars were asked, "Why do you need to believe in resurrection?" Their responses might surprise you. They weren't about belief systems or even concern about the next life. Their answers were about what they need now, in the concreteness of this life.

*I need the resurrection because my sister is sick and can't afford insurance.*

*I need the resurrection because I have told a weeping Haitian mother, 'No, I can't take your son home with me.'*

*I need the resurrection because I've exploded in rage at my children and watched their tiny faces cloud with hurt.*

*I need the resurrection because it promises that in the end all wrongs are made right; that death loses, that hope triumphs, and that life and love prevail. Always.*

We need the resurrection because sometimes life is hard. It can beat us down until we feel like it is finished, like we are finished. The promise of resurrection is that there is no life that is so spent, or worn out, or used up that it cannot begin again, no separation so final that we cannot be connected again.

This is our hope. It's the thing we need to carry with us everywhere: the truth that God reaches across every distance to find us, and then lifts us up, sets us on our feet again, and says, "Come with me." And the only prayer that's required in response to that invitation is the one that says, "Yes. I'm coming."