

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

When I was a kid growing up,  
there was no cable TV with it's cornucopia of channels.

We had six.

And we had no VCRs, DVDs, or DVRs.

I remember loving Holy Week

because the TV would show reruns of many of my favorite "classics."

The Greatest Story Ever Told,

Ben Hur,

The Robe,

and The Ten Commandments to name a few.

But my favorite by far,

for all the wrong reasons,

was Barabbas.

I couldn't wait for the announcer coming out of the commercial break  
to mispronounce the name!

I have always loved the stories

that circle around and through Jesus.

Today, however, is a tough one.

What are we to make of the cross?

It is the central symbol of our faith,

and yet today when we hear all that it means,

it is hard to embrace.

It's even hard to endure.

Maybe that is why the early Christians,

the followers of the way,

used the fish as their symbol of faith.

Even so, the cross has always been with us,  
is always with us.

Jesus told us, if we want to be free like him  
we need to take up our cross and follow him.

Today, that cross looks scary.

Very scary.

So scary, in fact, that theologians have been trying to explain it for thousands of years.

As often happens, they get it wrong.

Not always, but often.

Explaining God, you see, is tricky business.

We know we are made in the image of God,

but sometimes, like Adam,

we get ahead of ourselves.

The problem comes when we flip that around  
and end up making God in our image.

In the early, early church,

back even before the Bible was written,

the prevailing society was that of the Roman Empire,

a culture that ran on patronage and power.

It is no small wonder that this culture

colored the early churches understanding of God.

It was difficult for them to see the world any other way.

They just assumed that Heaven must run the same way, only better.

You know, without all the corruption.

When they looked at Jesus' death

and it looked so meaningless and so preventable,

they figured that there must have been a reason. There had to be!

It's only human.

The next logical step was,

that it had to be someone's fault.

It couldn't be God's fault, God is perfect,  
so it must be our fault.

In Roman culture if something went wrong, somebody had to pay.

So they figured that there had to be some sort of cosmic transaction made  
to appease God for our bad behavior.

And so the cross came to be seen as that transaction.

Did you happen to notice that in today's Gospel,  
the Gospel of John and the latest of the four Gospel to be written,  
that the day of the crucifixion is different  
than in the other three synoptic Gospels?

In the three synoptics,  
the Last Supper is a Passover sater meal  
that Jesus re-purposes in establishing the Eucharist.

In the Fourth Gospel,  
the last Supper is just a meal with his friends sometime before Passover.  
Jesus, the paschal lamb of God,  
is crucified on the day of preparation for the Passover,  
the same day that the paschal lambs for the Passover sater  
would be sacrificed.

As soon as 50 to 60 years after the crucifixion,  
the story begins to be embellished in an effort to help explain it.

Jesus the perfect and only Son of God,  
killed on the cross as a holy sacrifice for our sins.

In the Roman Empire,  
Emperors were known to sacrifice their children for political expediency  
and so you can see why this type of behavior  
might be deemed acceptable for God,  
but what about today?

Now a days, we have to put up with atheists calling God a child abuser,  
or a loan shark collecting on a bad debt,  
because of bad theology from thousands of years ago,  
that was perhaps reasonable, or at least defensible back then,  
but doesn't really work anymore.

So what are we to do?

Do not be afraid.

Look closer.

The problem isn't with God, it is with us. (It's always with us!)

Whenever we try to make God in our image,  
even when we take the best that we are,  
we will go wrong.

Every time.

All we have to do is look at the history of the church,  
just like we can look at our own history,  
to see the truth.

Sin is our constant companion.

But look closer.

The good news is... so is God.

So how do we go about separating the gold from the dross.

How do we find a way to see God through the fog of our false images.

Jesus told us.

He said, If you want to know the Father, look at the Son.

This is one of the mysteries of the Trinity that is so easy to miss.

Though the Son is not the Father, the Son is God!

Jesus is the way that God wants to be known in the world.

Jesus is God in the world.

God wants to know us so much that Jesus is born into the world as a human baby,  
and makes his way through the journey of a life

all the way to the cross.  
Though Jesus is fully human, Jesus is God  
Throughout that life  
we see Jesus dedicated to healing, forgiving, and loving  
everyone he meets.  
Jesus is being God in the world.  
We also see that throughout that journey to the cross,  
Jesus could have turned away many times,  
and yet he did not.  
All of his followers turn away.  
He does not.  
God's terrible love for the world  
kept him on that path all the way to the end.  
Even at the hour of his death,  
his nature to heal, forgive, and love everyone does not change.  
"Father forgive them for they know not what they are doing."  
I believe that this is the true power of the cross.  
This is how far God will go for us,  
not to pay for our sins,  
but to forgive us our sins, heal our wounds, and to love our very souls.  
Though our friends and family and even the world may leave us behind,  
God will never leave us behind.  
God will follow us,  
will doggedly pursue us to the very gates of death,  
and as we will find out on Sunday, even beyond them,  
to heal our wounds,  
to forgive our sins,  
and to love our very souls.  
That is what the cross says to us.

That is why this Friday is called Good.

That is why we are here today.

To pay tribute to a man

who showed us how to love and live a life even to the bitterest of ends,

and to thank God for a love so strong

that the Creator of Heaven and Earth would endure

even a torturous death on the cross

for a people too often self consumed

and oblivious to the needs of those around them.

I think Isaac Watts truly got it right in his hymn over 250 years ago. [474]

When I survey the wondrous cross where the young Prince of Glory died,

my richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast, save in the cross of Christ, my God:

all the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them to his blood.

See, from his head, his hands, his feet sorrow and love flow mingled down!

Did e'er such love and sorrow meet, or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small;

love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.

Amen.