

“Why Did Jesus Die?”  
Matthew 21:1-11; Romans 5:6-11  
Palm Sunday

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Westminster, Greenville  
Ben Dorr

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A number of years ago, Adam Gopnik wrote an article in *The New Yorker* about the writer C.S. Lewis.

Lewis, of course, is best known for his series of stories about the magical world of Narnia. I loved the stories as a boy, but it wasn't until I reached adulthood that I realized the books were also an allegory for the Christian faith.

In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Aslan the lion is a Christ-figure.

Aslan is killed by the evil White Witch,  
but comes back to life to defeat the witch and her followers.

In his article, Gopnik has great appreciation for the Narnia story, but he makes a fascinating and, I believe, spot-on critique of the allegory.

Gopnik argues that a lion is a very poor choice for a Christ figure:

“...a central point of the Gospel story is that Jesus is not the lion of...faith but the lamb of God,” Gopnik writes.

“If we had, say, a donkey, a seemingly uninspiring animal from an obscure corner of Narnia, raised as an uncouth and low-caste beast of burden, rallying the mice and rats  
and weasels and vultures  
and all the other unclean animals,

and then being killed by the lions in as humiliating a manner as possible—a donkey who reemerges...as the king of all creation—now, *that* would be a Christian allegory.”<sup>1</sup>

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Gopnik is right.  
But I get why Lewis chose a lion.

A lion is in charge, so to speak.  
A lion is king of the jungle.  
A lion is so much more POWERFUL than a donkey.

The question of power and authority, who’s in charge—it plays a central role on Palm Sunday.

We’re in the final Sunday of our sermon series, “Back to the Basics,” in which we’re exploring some of our most fundamental Christian beliefs from a Presbyterian/Reformed perspective. Our question this morning is “Why Did Jesus Die?”

And the most traditional answer to that question, the one that every Christian hears from the moment they first enter a church, is that Jesus died in order to save us from our sins.

It’s an answer that says God was in charge of what happened to Jesus during Holy Week.

In theological circles, this line of thought is called ATONEMENT. And there are various atonement theories, different rivers running to the same destination that have existed throughout Christian history.

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Gopnik, “Prisoner of Narnia,” in *The New Yorker*, November 21, 2005.

For example, there's **substitutionary atonement theory**:

Jesus died for our sins in our place.

He was our substitute.

We deserved it, but in order to save us by appeasing the wrath of God, Jesus was killed instead.

How many of you have heard that before?

It's very close to what Paul writes in Romans today:

*"But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God."*

It's probably the most widely held theory of atonement...the weakness of this theory, of course, is what does that say about God? Is God truly a wrathful God, one who demands a blood sacrifice for sin in order for God to be at peace?

Christian thinkers and theologians, through the years, have developed other atonement theories.

There's the **Christus Victor theory**, which describes the death of Jesus as God's victory over the powers of evil and death and sin. This line of thought does not paint a picture of a wrathful God. It describes a God who is determined to WIN, a God who is in a PITCHED BATTLE with all the forces that align themselves AGAINST the love of God.

In other words, by taking on the worst that the world could give—dying like a criminal, in as painful and public and humiliating a manner as possible, and then being raised from the dead on the third day—Jesus showed how the love of God has conquered sin and evil and death.

This theory of atonement says quite plainly:

No matter what happens to you in your life, the love of God gets the final word.

Personally, I prefer that theory over the substitutionary atonement theory. But there's yet a third theory to consider—it's called the **MORAL INFLUENCE theory**.

This theory places its emphasis not just on Jesus' death, but also on his life. It says that it matters how Jesus lived—and by living a perfectly obedient life, a life that excluded no one, a life that forgave everyone, a life that treated the outcasts and the vulnerable, Romans and religious leaders, disciples and Pharisees as nothing less than the children of God that they were—Jesus's faithfulness in life *compels us* to live like Jesus and to love like Jesus.

So what does Jesus' death have to do with this theory?

It shows where that kind of love will lead us.  
God's love is sacrificial love, costly love.

And when showing that love requires us to make a sacrifice, requires us to carry not only our own cross, but our neighbor's cross as well...in that, our salvation, the risen Christ, will be found—or rather, that he will find us.<sup>2</sup>

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**Our question this morning is “Why did Jesus die?”**

And any of the theories I've described would be a good Presbyterian answer to that question. But I wonder...have you ever thought about the question not just from a theological perspective, but from a “boots on the ground” perspective?

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<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed explanation of each atonement theory, see Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing, 2004.

In other words, have you thought about it by asking yourself:  
Who was responsible for Jesus' death?

Let me get at it like this.

There's yet another faithful line of thought that says Christians should be very careful with atonement theories, claiming that God was responsible for Jesus' death, that it was God's will, because that's like saying God desired the death of God's own child.

As Barbara Brown Taylor once put it, perhaps the death of Jesus was not "something God *desired*,  
but something God *suffered*."<sup>3</sup>

What if the death of Jesus was not part of a prearranged divine drama, but instead was caused by the human appetite for power and control...our insatiable desire to be kings and queens of our own jungles, so to speak?

Each of the Gospels makes it clear that the religious leaders of Jesus' day were threatened by Jesus. But remember, it was not the religious leaders who had the most power.

It was the Romans.

And in that part of the Roman Empire, it was Pontius Pilate.

The Presbyterian pastor Scott Black Johnston provides some helpful history here. He points out that when Jesus was entering Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday long ago, he was entering at the Eastern gate at basically the same time that Pilate would have entered Jerusalem from the Western gate of the city.

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998.

You see, it was Pilate's custom to make a show of Roman military might right before Passover every year. The Passover festival, after all, was a remembrance of the time that God saved God's people from the oppression and slavery of Pharaoh.

It was a festival that might put the wrong idea in some people's minds: if God could save us from the Egyptians back then, why can't God save us from the Romans right now?

Pilate wanted nothing to do with that line of thought.

So...at the very time that faithful Jews would travel to Jerusalem for the Passover, Pilate was going to travel to Jerusalem too—to show them who was in charge.

And he would enter the city with a full Roman battalion, war horses aplenty, a large demonstration of power. It was a warning shot to the people: stay in line, don't rock the boat!

And on that first Palm Sunday long ago, Jesus decided to rock the boat!

Jesus entered Jerusalem, not in a quiet, discreet way.  
But in a very public way.  
A way that poked fun of Pilate.

Jesus enters Jerusalem not with full military regalia...but on a donkey!

He's riding that uninspiring beast of burden with all the common people shouting his praises. When they cried "Hosanna," do you know what that word meant?

It meant "Save us!"  
Do you see what is Jesus doing here?

He's mocking Pilate.  
 He's thumbing his nose at Pilate.  
 He's questioning the power of Pilate.  
 On Palm Sunday, Jesus is provoking Pilate.<sup>4</sup>

And what do you think happens to someone who stirs up the hornet's nest with Pontius Pilate in that way?

You get hung on a cross!

**Our question this morning is: Why did Jesus die?**

On the one hand, it's because the religious authorities conspired to kill him.

On the other hand, it's because Pontius Pilate decided to make an example of him.

And on the third hand (can I have three hands here?), I believe that Jesus knew EXACTLY what would happen to him if he entered Jerusalem like he did. Jesus died because he decided to challenge the lion, to take on the king of the jungle in his own day.

Not with violence. Not by inciting a rebellion.  
 He did it by putting ALL HIS TRUST **in the love and power of God.**

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Have you ever seen someone do that?

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<sup>4</sup> For the history of Pontius Pilate's entrance into Jerusalem, I am indebted to a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston, "The Jester," preached on April 10, 2022 at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York, NY.

Have you ever seen someone take on the lions of their day by putting their trust in the love and power of God?

I'm thinking right now of someone I mentioned on Easter Sunday last year.

His name is Fyodor Raychynets, he's a pastor in Ukraine.

And 400 days into that terrible war, he has seen things he never expected to see. His church is in Bucha, where there was genocide, and torture, and executions of innocent people.

After Russian soldiers left Bucha, his church became a distribution center for relief and supplies from the United Nations. They gave out money, they gave out food...and people, all sorts of people, came to get what they needed in his church.

Then the money and food ran out.

And much to Pastor Raychynets' surprise, people still came.

They came to worship at his church.

Attendance at his church went from 200 on a Sunday before the war to 800 on a Sunday during the war! And then 1000 the next Sunday!

And the majority of these people—were not Christian. They had no Christian background, no faith...but they were hungry for what the church was offering.

The emotional safety.

The lack of judgment.

A place where people could speak their minds.

The outpouring of friendship and love.

Pastor Raychynets said he's having to relearn how to preach, how to teach, because he can't say—remember how it says this in the Bible? These people don't know the Bible!

And in the midst of all this, he's dealing with his own grief over the death of his son, just a few months ago.<sup>5</sup>

But Pastor Raychynets—he's going forward in HOPE, putting his trust in the love and power of God to see him and his church through...

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### **Our question this morning is “Why did Jesus die?”**

And for centuries, theologians have come up with this theory and that theory to explain it.

They've used many words.  
But all we need is one word, right?  
That word is Love.

Love that is beyond our comprehension.  
Love that extends farther than any one of us can imagine.  
Love with a capital L, that is God's abundant love for everyone.

You see, I understand the theory of substitutionary atonement,  
and the value of Christus Victor atonement,  
and the beauty of the moral influence theory of  
atonement...and I get why some people say it must be God's will that  
Jesus died, and I get why others say it could not have been God's will  
for Jesus to die.

I understand all that.

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<sup>5</sup> From an interview with Fyodor Raychynets by Miroslav Volf, on the podcast “For the Life of the World,” March 17, 2023.

Here's what I don't understand.

When Jesus died, when he submitted to a humiliating and excruciating act of capital punishment as God's only Son...he did so out of love for everyone.

For saints and sinners.

For disciples and pharisees.

For those who followed him, and those who feared him, and those who were curious about him, and those who decided to kill him.

He died for those who love God and he died for those who don't believe in God and he died for those who stand against everything that the love of God stands for...

Just the thought that Jesus died

for every single one of God's children who has ever lived  
and will ever live...

Do you understand that?

On the one hand, it means that Jesus died out of love for people like Pastor Raychynets and his church.

I get that.

On the other hand, it means that Jesus died for the people who occupied Bucha and committed acts of genocide right by that church.

Jesus died for them!

I mean, whew....how?!

How does the love of God do that???

(Amen.)