

**Sermon by Rev. Anthony Weisman, March 16, 2025**  
**HEB 10:10-12; 1COR 5:7-8; COL 1:20; 1JOHN 1:7**  
**“The Meaning of Jesus’ Death”**

Last week, we took a look at the history behind the crucifixion. Why did Jesus die? And why did he die the way he did? Jesus didn’t come down with a bad cold and sneeze himself to death; he was convicted of treason and executed. We talked about how that went down: The Romans had conquered and occupied the land of Israel, and the Jewish people experienced their rule as oppressive.

From time to time, Rome would do something – like impose a tax – that pushed the people past their breaking point. Jewish revolutionaries would rise up and rally their countrymen, would call them to take to arms and revolt. And the Romans would show no mercy in crushing these rebellions. Jews would be killed by the thousand. They would be put to death as traitors, as enemies of the state, and crucified – their bodies left hung on crosses lining the roads, their bodies left for the birds to feast upon, their bodies (or what remained of their bodies) left to serve as warnings to any would-be Jewish freedom-fighters: *This is what we will do to you if you dare to defy us.*

Jesus was close enough to a revolutionary to be confused for one. Many people mistook him for the leader of a burgeoning Jewish resistance movement. Rome’s liaisons in Israel, the Jewish elites, who knew both that Jesus himself was *not* a violent man with any intention of inciting violence, but also that a growing number of pilgrims who were in Jerusalem to celebrate the equivalent of the Jewish Fourth of July seemed to believe that he *was* one, and believe that he was about to declare independence from Rome – they acted quickly and quietly to do away with him, to do away with him *before* riots broke out, *before* the people began rebelling, and *before* the Roman armies marched in to restore order by slaughtering Jews right and left. They colluded with one of Jesus’s disciples, who helped them arrest him by stealth, they held a quick trial by night, and then *that was that*. Jesus was killed so that no one else would be killed.

And Jesus went along with all this. He went along with all this for the sake of peace and for the sake of his people. Again, those who had him executed *knew* that he was not a guerilla holy warrior and not a traitor; Jesus had in fact cooperated with them, had went along willingly with their scheme. And so they let his family and his followers live. They let them take his body down, so it wouldn’t rot on the cross; they let them give him a proper burial.

Were that all there was to the story, Jesus would have been forgotten – as so many Jewish revolutionaries before him had been forgotten, had been killed and then been forgotten. His crucifixion would have been just another crucifixion.

But something very strange happened. Something which made no sense whatsoever happened. Something which nobody was prepared for happened. Something which there was no precedent for, anywhere, ever, happened. Something which even the ones it happened *to* struggled to believe happened *happened*. A non-insignificant number of people began having sightings of Jesus, of Jesus who had died, but who – somehow, and who knows how! – seemed to have... *un-died*. They began seeing him.

They didn't always know what they were seeing. They didn't know how to describe what they were seeing, and so they described it in pretty dramatically different, all-over-the-place-to-the-point-of-being-contradictory, ways. Sometimes, they said that he seemed to have a physical body, said that they saw him eat and drink. Other times, they said, no, he was more like a spirit, said that they saw him pass through walls (and how could he do *that* with a full stomach?).

The overall impression you get is of a group of people who were experiencing something they had no words for and had no categories for, who were struggling against the limits of not only understanding and human reason, but of sensory perception itself. Whatever you make of these sightings – and we'll just go ahead and save *that* for the Easter season – the fact is that some people were convinced Jesus had come back from the dead. And so, they couldn't *not* wonder: Well, why did he die if he was going to turn around and *un-die* three days later? Wouldn't it have been easier on everyone if he'd skipped the whole excruciatingly-painful-being-nailed-to-a-cross thing? You know what's easier and better than being raised from the dead? Not being dead in the first place!

I think it probably would have been impossible for them *not* to come to the conclusion that *Jesus's death must have some meaning in and of itself*. Otherwise, again, just, why? Right? And so they began trying to figure out what that meaning was.

They did this the way anyone would do this: They tried to find some way to fit Jesus's death into their existing mental framework. They looked for parallels, analogies, similarities, even remote similarities, something, anything, to compare this death, this death which was both was and wasn't a death, this death which was not less than a death but which *was* more than a death – to compare it to, to consider it alongside.

Had they had any experience, any other experience, of a death which seemed to have to happen, which seemed to be an inexplicably necessary part of some divine plan? Had they had any experience, any other experience, of a death which seemed also to be an experience of life? And the answer to that was: *Yes*. Yes they had.

Their experience of making sacrifices at the temple seemed to them to be almost perfectly analogous. They, like all ancient peoples ritually sacrificed animals; this was a regular act of worship. We get hung up on this. We don't understand it. We find it disturbing.

But it wasn't just the Jews who did this. Long, long after the Jews stopped ritually sacrificing animals, the Romans were still doing it. Even into the Fourth Century, you have pagan philosophers like Celestius saying things like: "Prayer without sacrifice is mere words." For what it's worth: Almost the only meat people ate anywhere in the ancient Mediterranean world was the meat that came from these ritual sacrifices. Priests were essentially butchers. You didn't go to them for counselling; you went with livestock, which they cut up for you and said prayers over as they put the great flanks on the fire, barbecued it all up, and then gave it back.

This actually demonstrated a profoundly high regard for animal life. It couldn't be taken indiscriminately or wantonly. Killing an animal to eat was a sacred act, to be done in a holy temple, prayerfully, gratefully. The life of the animal was believed to be "in" its blood, so the blood was drained, poured out, given back to God. Humans were forbidden to consume it, and could be charged for murder if they did so. All of which is to say: In the act of making a ritual animal sacrifice, people had experiences of suffering and death that were also experiences of communion and life.

And so: Jesus's followers started thinking about his death as being not only a death, but a sacrificial death. His life wasn't taken; it was given – back to God, as an offering. And in the same way that sacrifices, that offerings, "did" something, were "for" something, in the same way that they accompanied prayers of gratitude or for forgiveness, so, too, Jesus's death – seen as a sort of sacrifice – must have "done" something or been "for" something. It must have, in and of itself, mysteriously, had some effect on God or on us. In the different scriptures you heard read earlier, you can see how these early Christians used the language of ritual animal sacrifices and used this imagery to speak about Jesus. You can see them using this language and this imagery in more and more creative ways. They all but ran wild with it.

In the passage from the Book of Hebrews, Jesus's death is compared to the sacrifice offered by the Jewish high priest on the Day of Atonement – a sacrifice which was made once a year for the forgiveness of sins.

In the passage from the Book of 1 Corinthians, Jesus's death is compared to the Passover lamb, which was also sacrificed once a year, not for the forgiveness of sins, though, but as a way to commemorate the people's exodus from Egypt. The blood of the first Passover lambs was – remember – painted all around the people's doors, to protect them from the angel of death that was moving through the land; it warded off the evil spirit and ensured that they would be "passed over" and live. That blood – to which Jesus's blood is likened – was protective.

Compare that to the blood in the passage from the Book of 1 John, which is not protective, but *cleansing*, in the way the waters of the ritual baths Jews would take before offering their ritual sacrifices, were cleansing. The metaphor of the sacrifice totally got away from them. Was Jesus's death like the Day of Atonement sacrifice? Or was it like the Passover sacrifice?

Or was it like, as the Book of Colossians says, the sacrifice offered when you had wronged someone else in order to be reconciled not to God, but to *them*? In Jewish religious practice, a sacrifice wasn't a sacrifice wasn't a sacrifice. But that didn't matter.

As Jesus's followers saw it and spoke of it, his death was all of the above. And it could be this, be all of this all at the same time, because – and this is SO important, SO IMPORTANT – *they weren't being literal about it*. "Sacrifice" was an analogy. "Sacrifice" was a metaphor. Every passage in the New Testament which speaks of Jesus's death in this way is figurative, poetic, symbolic, *not to be taken literally*. In other places, Jesus's death is described as a ransom, a ransom paid to free hostages. Was his death a ransom payment or a sacrifice? Those are two very different things. See, you can't take any of this literally without making foolishness of it.

Which later Christians went ahead and did anyway. The imagery of Jesus's blood being "cleansing" – like the waters of the ritual Jewish baths were cleansing – this imagery comes into evangelical hymns and praise choruses that lots of churches still sing, like: "There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Emmanuel's veins, and sinners plunged beneath that flood, lose all their guilty stains." I'm sorry, but I just think that is gross. At the point when you're singing about cannonballing into a swimming pool of O-, it's like, *what?*

Here's my point: Christians have always wanted to say that there was more to Jesus's death than a man dying. His death means something. His death does something. The New Testament doesn't explain what that "something" is. Instead, it gives us different metaphors to use to explore it, to imagine our way into it.

Behind each of these different metaphors stands a whole different universe of meaning. There is a sense in which Jesus's suffering and death – contemplating it, meditating on it – can be cleansing, can be purifying – can be all the many things these different metaphors suggest it can be.

For many Christians, it has been freeing, has been empowering. It has gripped them. It has called to them. It has changed their lives in ways their lives needed to be changed. It has healed them in ways they longed to be healed.

The music of "*There's a Wideness in God's Mercy*," which we sung before the sermon, was written by a prolific composer named Calvin Hampton. He wrote this song about finding "healing in Christ's blood" while he lay dying of AIDS. He named it St. Helena, for the nurse who cared for him in his last days. How do you explain the healing that a man dying of a disease that turned what flowed through his own veins into poison – how do you explain the healing he found in Christ's blood? You can't. And it would be impious to try. What lies behind these metaphors is personal and mysterious and deep and precious and true and real and powerful – and no less so because our words and our logic are too poor for it.