

“Who crucified our Lord?”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Acts 3:12-19

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Oh, Peter. Your preaching is not off to a good start. You’ve got no funny anecdotes, no interesting illustrations. And frankly, your sermon is a bit of a downer. Trust me, you do not win any points by calling your parishioners murderers. You see, the real problem here, Peter, is eye contact. Because it’s going to be *awkward* when you say, “You killed Christ,” and then make eye contact with someone.

This whole idea that we should use fear and guilt to motivate repentance is *so first century*.

When you walk into our church, you see a sign that welcomes everyone; you find brochures about mission projects and spiritual retreats; you meet a greeter with a smile and a handshake; afterward, we even have cookies! But a few years back, when Jenna and I were touring Greece, we came across this ancient church that had a very different purpose for its narthex. A purpose I suspect Peter would have appreciated. This narthex was covered, wall to ceiling, in horrific paintings of hell. If you happened to be new to the faith and hadn’t yet been baptized, or if you had sinned, you were made to stand in this “outer darkness” for hours, staring at these torture paintings, while the “good” Christians worshiped in the sanctuary. Unsurprisingly, people did tend to repent.

But here, today, that’s not what we do. We don’t scare people into believing; we invite people into a faith that answers what they’ve been seeking all their lives: completion, purpose, love.

You’d think we had moved past this. It’s Easter. Peter, why are you still talking about Jesus’ death on the cross?

For reasons beyond fear, Peter believed it was necessary to confront the crucifixion and understand what happened. To understand who did it. Who killed Christ?

Peter looks at these people who’ve gathered around him—friends, neighbors, people he’s known all his life—and says: You did. You handed Jesus over; you rejected him. You killed the Author of life.

Perhaps Peter could foresee what was to come. For two millennia, we’ve blamed everyone else—the Jews, the Romans—condemning them as “Christ-killers” and generating some of history’s worst acts of violence and prejudice.

But there is one place we have always been afraid to look, one place that holds an answer: the mirror. “We’re not like this,” the people shout at Peter. Peter says: You are like this. I am like this.

Peter had just betrayed Jesus, denying him three times. Peter knows what he's talking about. It's been weighing on him, and he needs to be free.

We like to think we would have been different—if we had lived back then, in Jesus' time. We like to think that we would not have mocked or thrown stones, that we would not have nailed him to the cross or walked away or lied to save our skin. But there was nothing special about the people who did these things; nothing particularly evil or perverse. We are them. They are us. Every day, we turn our back on Jesus. We see him on the street, in the hospital or prison. We hear his cries. And we do nothing. Or we do just enough that it doesn't actually cost us any real sacrifice.

The same fear that swelled in their hearts has swelled in ours as well. The same hate. The same willingness to look the other way. The same compromise with ambition and power. The same refusal to believe that the world could ever be any different, any better.

There are monsters in us.

Peter needs us to see these monsters. But not because Peter wants us to feel guilty or afraid. But because Peter knows something that every good parent knows: monsters are only scary in the dark, when they're hidden under beds and tucked away in closets. Their power derives from our fear to look at them. Unseen, they wreak havoc. But shine a light on them, rip open those closet doors, lift up the bed... and they vanish.

Peter's sermon isn't, after all, anything like that ancient, ghoulish narthex. He makes no threats. He never once mentions punishment or hell. All he asks is that we stop pretending, stop blaming others, and accept that the cross bears our fingerprints.

Peter wants us to see those fingerprints because once we acknowledge that we are a part of the story of Jesus' death, we realize that we are a part of the rest of the story as well. We are the ones who buried Jesus and wrapped him in fresh linen. We are the women who gathered early at Jesus' tomb and witnessed his resurrection. We are the disciples whose eyes were opened, who touched Jesus' hands, who sat at table with him and broke bread, who were blessed by his peace, transformed by his forgiveness, and graced by tongues of fire.

That's what Peter wants us to see—that if we're a part of the cross, we are a part of the resurrection also.

Only when we have faced up to the monster of the cross do we finally accept, finally believe, that there's no monster in us that God's love can't redeem.

This has always been a sermon about God's power. Right before preaching, Peter healed a man lame from birth. The text says that Peter "looked intently" at this man; he looked into the monster that had crippled this man's life—his poverty, his isolation, his rejection, his invisibility. And, in looking, he drove that monster out. He made the man stand up and walk. People were amazed at Peter's power and flocked to him. And that's when he begins his sermon.

He says it wasn't his "power or piety" that made this man walk; it was God—just as it was God's power that rose Jesus from the dead, just as it is God's power that wipes away our sins and restores us to God.

After preaching a similar sermon just a chapter earlier, Peter baptized thousands who went on to form a "glad and generous" community of disciples who worshiped, ate, and shared their possessions in common. A community of people who loved and cared for each other.

They were free—in the way Peter wants us to be free. Because no matter how many times we've heard this story, many of us have believed that there are still parts of us that are unredeemable, still parts that even God can't love or revive. We thought this was a story about other people in another time and another place. Peter says no: this is about you, every bit of you, every part of you you've ever thought unloveable.

Rainer Maria Rilke once wrote, "How should we be able to forget those ancient myths that are at the beginning of all peoples, the myths about dragons that at the last moment turn into princesses. Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us act, just once, with beauty and courage. Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love."

That is the good news Peter wants us to hear today—that, in one act of beauty and courage, Jesus saved even us. Because even at our worst moment, when we were most monstrous, Jesus still saw something in us that was worth saving, worth loving. Even then, Jesus didn't give up on us.

That is the supreme irony of the cross: precisely when we saw how horrible we could be, Jesus showed us how lovely we could be.

When we grabbed hold of Jesus that day to put him on the cross, he grabbed hold of us, wrapping his hands around all those monstrous parts of us—every hateful word, every refusal to forgive, every prejudice, every injustice, every gas chamber and lynching tree, every shame and guilt—and he pulled us through the cross, to the other side. He carried us with him, into his resurrection. He kissed the monster full on the lips. And it changed that day.

Not a monster at all, but a child of God.

I know that the church has used guilt like a knife in the gut. But that's not Jesus. And that's not Peter. Because Peter knows the twist of that knife; he knows how much it hurts. And it is not a wound he seeks to inflict, but a balm.

Today is about knowing that even the worst of us is not beyond God's love.

Today is about recognizing that we are a part of this story. Jesus saw us. He saw all the monsters that have crippled our lives. And he loved us anyway. He saved us. He turned our dragons into princesses. He made us stand up and walk. **Amen.**