

To Easter, Part 3 – To Follow

I. Introduction

- a. This week we're in part 3 of our 4-part series *To Easter*.
- b. If you're new or just joining us this week, in this series we've been exploring the Christian tradition of Easter.
- c. Easter stands at the center of all that we believe. Whether you grew up in the church or not, Easter is one of our most familiar holidays.
- d. Yet if we're not careful sometimes the things that are the most familiar to us can become unfamiliar, even if they are the most important.
- e. So in this series we're exploring stories from the Bible that lead us to Easter and explain to us why Easter is so important to our faith.
- f. We began in week one with a big mess – the mess created when God first created man. God created man as his crowning achievement – his prized creation, created in his image to oversee the world he had created. God's relationship with man was close and intimate – it was a love relationship. And in love there is always choice and there is always risk.
- g. Man used his choice to reject what God said and to choose right and wrong for himself – what the Bible calls “sin.” In so doing man's relationship with God was broken, his sense of identity or self was broken (he felt shame), his relationship with others was broken (blame, jealousy, envy, violence), and his connection to the earth itself was broken (the world created for him was now hostile).
- h. As we look at the rest of the Bible and even at our lives it's easy to see this brokenness is still with us – in us and in our world. And we said that our first step to Easter was acknowledging this brokenness and turning back toward God to be our source of what's good and bad – what the Bible calls repentance.
- i. Then last week we saw how God stepped into the mess that was made and made a promise to one man – Abraham – to clean up the mess through him and his family.
- j. God made an unconditional promise to Abraham that the world would be blessed through him, and we learned that Abraham sealed that relationship by believing God and trusting him.
- k. Four hundred years after that promise God gave Abraham's descendants what we know as the law. He gave them the law not to earn relationship – relationship with God was based on his promise to provide a way and man's faith in that promise. The law was given as a tutor – to teach them about God and about how he created life to be lived best.
- l. The law was a gift within a relationship, not a means to earn relationship with God, because we can never earn God's love.
- m. So we ended last week with Israel's failure to maintain their part of the deal with God. God promised that if they would follow the law

he had given them they would have an abundant and prosperous life.

- n. But Israel tried to use the law and the sacrificial system to live however they wanted and then go through the rights and rituals to cover over their sin.
- o. Time and again God sent messengers known as prophets calling Israel to repent – to turn away from their destructive way of life and to turn back to him. To stop going through the motions of the empty religion of ritual and sacrifices and to really trust them.
- p. But Israel wouldn't do it. They couldn't do it.
- q. For God it must have been a bit like what we experience when we watch a friend or family member struggling making destructive lifestyle choices (drug and alcohol addiction or unhealthy relationships). You want to help, you want them to have a better life, you want them to make better choices, but you can't make them choose. Why? Because love requires freedom, and love requires choice.
- r. Ultimately Israel couldn't follow the law God gave them to experience life and prosperity, because the law itself can never change the heart. Their hearts were still rebellious and set against God. What Israel needed, what we all need, to fully repair the damage of sin is a change of heart. But how could God change people's heart?
- s. This brings us to our next step on the journey to Easter. As Israel spiraled down and nation after nation conquered and oppressed them, God sent the prophets to call them back, but as they continued to resist, he also sent the prophets with a message of hope.

II. Scripture

- a. If you have your Bibles turn with me to Luke chapter 4 (that's on pg 718 in the black bibles in front of you). Let me start by giving you a little context for where we're starting tonight.
- b. Through Israel's decline and fall to the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and the Persians. God continued to send the message of hope through the prophets that he wasn't done yet.
- c. God was not finished with Israel. Though they had lost everything, God promised to restore them. Despite their faithlessness, God was still faithful. God promised to one day initiate a *new covenant* with them, and in so doing he would implant his word in their minds and on their hearts. What the law couldn't do, God would do.
- d. Alongside this promise of a new covenant is the promise of one who would come as a king to initiate this covenant. This "anointed one" or in Hebrew "messiah" would usher in redemption of the people.
- e. He promised that a leader would arise – an heir of David, the most famous and most faithful of all Israel's kings. This king, this messiah, would be a savior to Israel.

- f. For around 600 years they suffered living as exiles in other countries or living in their own land under the occupation of foreign rulers.
- g. Can you imagine the level of their expectation? How many times they'd thought and dreamed about what this person would be like?
- h. This was the setting when a young, unknown carpenter from the city of Nazareth named Jesus walked into his hometown synagogue one Sabbath. Turn with me to the New Testament book of Luke 4:14 (pg 718):
- i. *14 Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside.15 He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.16 He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read,17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: 18 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free,19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." 20 Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him.21 He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:14-21)*
- j. Jesus stands up in his local synagogue and says, "You've all been waiting for the time when God will set things right. Well, it's here. I'm the one you've been looking for."
- k. Have you ever had the opportunity to meet someone you know a lot about but have never met? Like someone famous or influential? Maybe you've read about them or seen them on TV but then you get to meet them?
- l. That happened to me a few months ago when I got to meet a man that many believe is a "messiah" of sorts – Broncos QB Tim Tebow.
- m. For years I've watched Tebow from a distance. I watched him play for Florida for four years, I followed his journey through the draft to Denver, I've watched interviews and stories about him, and read countless magazine and newspaper articles. I know a lot *about* Tim Tebow. I had a pretty well developed opinion of what he was like. But I was actually going to meet him.
- n. If you've ever had an experience like this, it's pretty surreal. It was a reception for Tim and his brothers to meet members of the faith and business community. I was there for a couple hours and in that time I got to spend about 20 minutes or so getting to know Tim.
- o. In that time my expectations and my experience collided. I had to decide for myself how the real Tim Tebow matched up with my expectations. Would I be more or less inclined to believe in him, to cheer for him, to want him to be successful? Since you're probably

wondering, my time was very positive, and I'm a bigger believer in Tim for that experience. But the point is that anytime your expectation collides with reality, you have to decide which to choose.

- p. Now can you imagine what it must have been like for these people when Jesus announced that he was the messiah? 600 years of expectations collided with reality. Talk about surreal!
- q. Now as you can imagine, people were skeptical. Especially those who knew him – who watched him grow up.
- r. Jesus began traveling throughout the region:
 - i. Teaching people about the coming kingdom of God. What would it look like for man to live again as part of a kingdom where God's will was done? What would this "new covenant" world look like – no more brokenness, no more sickness, no more wars, no more shame, no more death.
 - ii. Performing miracles – healing the sick, making the lame walk, casting out evil spirits, giving the blind sight, and on several occasions actually bringing someone back to life who had died. It was as if this new kingdom he was talking about was a present reality wherever Jesus he went. All the broken things of our world were coming un-true.
 - iii. Inviting people to follow – to believe in what Jesus said and did. To believe that this new kingdom was present with him and that everyone – regardless of wealth, gender, ethnicity, or social class. Jesus was for everyone.
- s. As you can imagine, Jesus created quite a stir. Wherever he went entire towns went out to hear him teach, bringing their sick to be healed, and they were all trying to figure out exactly *who he was*. Their expectations and experience were colliding.
- t. Jesus made some pretty bold claims about who he was. He claimed to be from God – that he and God were one. He said, "If you've seen me you've seen God." He claimed to be God *with us*. God with skin on. And he wasn't just healing people – he was telling them that their sins were forgiven. This was something that only God could do.
- u. It's interesting to see in the Scriptures how people reacted to him. Wherever he went the poor, the marginalized, the hurting – everyone who was desperate for God believed in him and followed him.
- v. But those who had the hardest time were the rich, the powerful, but especially the very religious. The group Jesus clashed with more than anyone else was the experts in the law.
- w. These were the people who had studied the Scripture more than anyone. They had pored over these prophecies about the new covenant and the messiah. They had a very clear picture of what the messiah was supposed to be like, and Jesus did not meet their expectations.
- x. Remember that other nations had occupied and oppressed Israel for over 600 years at this point. So the expectations of the religious

leaders for the messiah were shaped by their nationalistic desires. They were looking for a strong leader – a king who could lead Israel in overthrowing their Roman occupiers. He wasn't supposed to be a lowly carpenter from Nazareth.

- y. So despite his teaching, despite his miracles, despite all the people following him, and all the evidence pointing to Jesus as messiah. The religious leaders couldn't or wouldn't believe. They began to see Jesus as a problem, a distraction – a threat, and they began to plan how they could get rid of him.
- z. Now the religious leaders weren't the only ones who let their perceptions of Jesus skew the reality of who he was. Even Jesus' closest followers didn't fully understand him. Look at this exchange between Jesus and his closest followers. Turn to Matthew, chapter 16 (pg 687):
 - aa. *13 When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" 14 They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15 "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" 16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." (Matt 16:13-16)*
 - bb. So his closest followers seem to get it – they profess their belief he is Messiah, and yet they are unwilling to accept certain things Jesus tells them about himself. Skip down to verse 21 in the same chapter:
 - cc. *21 From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. 22 Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" 23 Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." (Matt 16:21-23)*
 - dd. They had missed the prophecies that talked about a suffering servant who would pay for the sins of the people. They were eager to see Jesus as king but not as a suffering servant who would die for the sins of the world.
 - ee. But Jesus knew what lay ahead of him, and he knew it was part of God's bigger plan. But his closest followers weren't ready to accept that.
 - ff. Maybe they couldn't accept it because of what Jesus said it meant for them:
 - gg. *24 Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. 26 What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?" (Matt 16:24-26)*

- hh. Jesus knows his path leads him to death, and that all who follow him must follow him through death as well. It is a death to personal agendas. It is a death to preconceived ideas about what Jesus will do for us. It is a death to controlling outcomes. It's a death to our will in subjection to his. It's a death to standing on our own and making our own way. But it is death that Jesus said leads to life. Jesus is the way to life, but the way to life is through death.
- ii. Just as he had told his disciples, Jesus begins heading toward Jerusalem in order to be there for the Jewish Passover festival – a celebration of God freeing Israel from bondage in Egypt centuries before.
- jj. Today is the day we call Palm Sunday. It is the day more than 2000 years ago that Jesus entered Jerusalem for Passover. It is the beginning of the last week of his life.
- kk. It's called Palm Sunday, because as he entered the city his followers lined the road sides laying their coats and palm branches on the ground – giving him a royal entrance welcoming him as their king. As he passed they shouted “Hosanna”, meaning “Save us!” And “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”
- ll. But how quickly things would change. After more encounters with him, the religious leaders finally decide they've had enough of Jesus. They devise a plan to have him arrested, tried, and executed as someone inciting a rebellion against Rome.
- mm. That's exactly what they did. They conjured up charges of blasphemy against God and treason against Caesar, and he was tried and sentenced to be executed by crucifixion.
- nn. Only five days after entering the city being hailed as a king, Jesus was executed on a cross with a sign above his head that mockingly read “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.”
- oo. Jesus was dead. All of his followers scattered and hid, fearing for their own lives. In the eyes of the Romans and the Jewish religious leaders this was the end of the story.
- pp. But of course the story of Easter doesn't end here. God was not finished, and we'll talk about the climax of this story next week. But tonight I want to sit in the tension of Jesus' death. What was the purpose of his death, and what does his death mean for us? Whatever your expectations of Jesus are, they must meet at the reality of the cross.

III. Conclusion

- a. First, why did Jesus have to die? The answer takes us all the way back to week one – to the destruction brought about by our sin – our choice to choose right and wrong for ourselves irrespective of God. We are all complicit in some way to contributing to this brokenness. We all are in need of God's forgiveness for this.
- b. So what's the problem, can't God just forgive us? Yes, but anyone who has forgiven knows it's not “just” anything. Forgiveness involves absorbing the cost of the offense for the one responsible.

- c. Let me give you an example; let's say you loan a friend your car. As they back out of the driveway they go through your garden and smash the fence in the process. If the damage is going to be fixed it's going to cost *someone*. Either you can pay it or you can force him to, but someone has to pay.
- d. The problem with that analogy is that most of the wrongs we suffer in life can't be assessed economically.
 - i. How can you assess the cost to a woman who has been raped?
 - ii. How can you assess the cost to a family whose son was killed by a drunk driver?
 - iii. How can you assess the cost for the person who was abused as a child?
- e. You have two options in these situations.
 - i. You can seek retribution – to make the offender suffer for what they've done. But this doesn't really solve the problem does it? It may give a temporary sense of satisfaction, but revenge always causes more destruction.
 - ii. You can forgive. Forgiveness means refusing to make them pay, but to do so is agonizing. It is a costly form of suffering. It may even feel like a death. But it is a death that leads to life. Anyone who has truly forgiven someone knows the joy of peace and reconciliation that lies on the other side of that death.
- f. Easter is a story about forgiveness. It's God's story of restoring all that is broken in us and in the world. But this restoration was made possible by the costly sacrifice of Jesus' life on the cross. This is a story about finding life on the other side of death. And this is more than a story we hear; it is a story we are all invited to live.
- g. Jesus still invites us to follow him - to discover the eternal life that he offers, but when we follow Jesus he leads us to the cross and says to us as he did his first followers, the way to life is through death.
 - i. It is a death to what you've heard about Jesus – your expectations of him. Who is Jesus to you? Have you ever really met Jesus and believed in him?
 - ii. It is also a kind of death to yourself – giving up reliance on yourself and trusting Jesus.
- h. Jesus' death was the initiation of the new covenant between God and man. Through Jesus, God created a way for us.
- i. Tonight as we close we're going to observe communion together. Communion is a tradition that Jesus himself gave us.
- j. The night before he was betrayed, Jesus ate a meal with his followers. As he broke the bread he said, "This is my body broken for you; do this in remembrance of me." As he poured the wine he said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this in remembrance of me."

- k. I'd like you to take a few moments at your seat and consider the question, "Who do you say Jesus is? Who is he to you?" Not what you've heard or what others say – Who is he to you. Think on that question and then take it with you into this week as we remember Jesus.
- l. Then as Brian plays, whenever you're ready, just slip from your seat. Come and break some bread and dip it in the wine or juice. And eat in remembrance of Jesus.