



No Stopping God – Touchpoint for March 29, 2023

(Scripture readings from John 12:13 and John 19:1-16 NRSVUE)

TOUCH POINT

Grace and peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

On Palm Sunday we said:

“Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – The king of Israel.”

On Good Friday we said:

“Crucify him! ... We have no king but Caesar.”

Next week is Holy Week. The foundation of our faith story. Today we look at both Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem and his crucifixion.

The Church speaks of the first day of this week as Palm/Passion Sunday. It is a strange juxtaposition. Jesus being hailed as a conquering hero by the people at the beginning of the week... and then they are shouting, “Crucify him!” just five days later.

The fickleness of humanity is never on greater display than in this narrative. Neither has God's relentless and unstoppable grace, forgiveness and love ever been on greater display. And as you might have guessed, it is the latter of those two I would like to focus on.

The relentless, unstoppable grace of God, even in the face of our opposition.

The relentless, unstoppable grace of God, even in the face of our denial, betrayal, washing of our hands, and screaming for God's death.

In the face of our relentless opposition, God's love, grace, and forgiveness show themselves to be more relentless, more unstoppable.

That is what this week is about. That is what the passion, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus is about. God will simply not stop being a loving, gracious, and forgiving God. And not in some theoretical, metaphysical, mystical way. God will simply not stop being a loving, gracious, and forgiving God here on earth – to us and with us.

We keep wanting to turn the passion and crucifixion of Jesus into a theory... Some kind of celestial bookkeeping theory. Some kind of sacrificial construct theory. Some kind of who knows what... All so we can get away from the fact that Jesus was doing nothing more than dying on the cross – where we put him – and pronouncing forgiveness.

You know the theories. Jesus is doing something more than dying. What makes the cross important is what is happening on some spiritual plane, somewhere else. What makes the cross important is what is happening in the celestial bookkeeping game.

Jesus is paying the price for our sins. But who is he paying? And why does someone have to be paid? And if someone is paid, how can we call it forgiveness?

We come up with all kinds of theories of atonement that basically have only one underlying reason for their existence – to blame God for what we did. Most atonement theories are simply an intellectual exercise in blaming God for what we did.

If this is all and only God's doing, then there is no reason for Jesus to say on the cross, "Father, forgive them..." After all, it's not our fault he's on the cross, but God's. This was all God's plan.

So it is time we stopped our celestial game playing and theorizing, and just took a look at what happened... here on earth.

Jesus comes into our world bringing the kingdom of God. The term is a verb. Kingdom of God = activity of God – or reign of God is a better term. Jesus brings the activity of God, the reign of God into this world in a very specific and individual way.

And what does it look like?

Well, **Luke 4:18** puts it well. Jesus is speaking at the start of his public ministry, and he quotes the prophet Isaiah:

*"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,
to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord."*

Jesus brings this kingdom into our world, and we say "NO." And the reason we say no is because this kingdom invalidated all of our kingdoms. And we simply will not let anyone take away our little kingdoms from us, those little kingdoms and fiefdoms we have spent so much time and energy building.

And so, we threaten Jesus with death. "Do it our way or else." "Do it our way or die." We come face to face with God, and we have the audacity to say, "Do it our way or else."

And here is the Good News: Jesus says "NO" to our ways. "NO" to our rules, codes, laws, beliefs, and systems.

This is the good news. God will not do things our way. God will not call off God's mercy, love, and grace just because we don't want it. In fact, God will not be satisfied until God can exercise absolute grace, forgiveness, and mercy over us.

I want to repeat that: God will not be satisfied until God can exercise absolute grace, forgiveness, and mercy over us.

Perhaps this will help clear up the phrase that the cross “satisfies the wrath of God.” We take it to mean that God is angry at us for our sins, and until someone pays with a pound of flesh, God will not be satisfied.

But I would encourage you to consider a different way to look at it. God is a loving and forgiving God. A God of mercy. This is who God is. This is what makes God happy. This is what God delights in.

When God cannot be this way, when we set up religious systems that are antithetical to this, when we proclaim a God different from this... This is when God gets angry, wrathful.

God wants to love us, be gracious to us, have mercy on us. Not on some theoretical plane, but here on earth, in the flesh.

God wants to love, be gracious, AND have mercy on **ALL OF US** – here and now.

And for that we strip him, beat him, torture him, and crucify him. Because we don't believe everyone should have grace, love and mercy. Only a chosen few should receive it. And of course, we are always a part of that chosen few.

Why is it, we always draw the circle of God's grace just big enough to cover our heels, but not quite big enough to cover those who are different from us?

And so, we tell the Christ to stop.

But God will not stop. Not even on the cross. In fact, it is on the cross that Jesus makes a most profound pronouncement:

“Father, forgive them...”

And when he comes back two days later, he says to those who denied, betrayed and ran away from him, ***“Peace be with you.”***

God has finally done it. God has finally had the last word over us. God is finally satisfied.

God is in effect saying, ***“I have now forgiven you up to the point of death, I have now forgiven you in death, and I have now forgiven you on the other side of death. I am now satisfied.”***

Only in this way can we say the cross satisfies the wrath of God.

Or, to put it another way, Jesus does not die on the cross so that God will be merciful and forgiving. Jesus dies on the cross because God is merciful and forgiving.

We've got it backwards. We think that if Jesus isn't crucified, God won't forgive us. We think somebody has to pay before God will be forgiving.

Ha, that's a laugh.

God forgives in the Old Testament – Abraham, Moses, David, and many others. Jesus pronounces forgiveness to a paralytic and others before he dies. God is forgiving whether Jesus dies on the cross or not. In fact, if Jesus hadn't been crucified, he would have gone on forgiving just as he had in the previous three years.

So, what does the cross have to do with forgiveness?

Simply this: The cross tells us how far God will go to proclaim forgiveness, to do forgiveness. God will keep forgiving, even under penalty of death. There isn't one thing you can do to stop God from forgiving you.

What about rejecting God? If I reject God or don't believe in God, will God still forgive me?

Oh, why stop there? Let's take it further. What if I kill God? Which I would certainly say is a form of rejection and unbelief? Would God still forgive us?

Listen to the Passion story once again. Once in history, God took on flesh and walked on this earth proclaiming love and forgiveness to all he met. And we didn't just reject him. We didn't just 'not believe' him. We killed him. We crucified him. And do you know what he said as he hung from the cross?

“Father, forgive them...”

Why do we think unbelief is worse than hanging him on a cross and killing him? Why do we think not believing can stop God's grace and forgiveness? I just don't get it.

Look at this meal. Denying Jesus doesn't stop him from giving himself to Peter. Betraying Jesus doesn't stop him from giving himself to Judas. Falling asleep and running away doesn't stop Jesus from giving himself to the rest.

And putting him on a cross doesn't stop Jesus from forgiving. Are you sensing a pattern here???

God simply will not stop – but it's time for me to.

Amen.

Spirit in the Desert

Opening Songs

Be Still

(The London Fox Taizé Choir)

Be Still, know that I am God

Create in Me

(The Concordia Choir)

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence and take not the holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation and uphold me with thy free spirit.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

See Him

(Keith Duke)

See him: 1) silent and lifeless, 2) alone and forlorn, 3) broken and helpless...crowned with a garland of thorns, 4) as son and as brother, 5) related to all, 6) through the grief of a mother...hurting the most of all, 7) as healer and teacher, 8) as helper and friend, 9) as prophet and preacher...

Ignore Him? I doubt if you can.

The Meal

The Lord's Prayer

(“Our Father,” Taizé Reflections)

Benediction

Gaelic Blessing/Deep Peace

(John Rutter, The Cambridge Singers)

Deep peace of the running wave to you. Deep peace of the flowing air to you.
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you. Deep peace of the shining stars to you.
Deep peace of the gentle night to you. Moon and stars pour their healing light on you.
Deep peace of Christ, of Christ the light of the world to you.
Deep peace of Christ to you.