

The Prequel

First Sunday in Lent,
March 1, 2009

We're starting a new series of messages today as we begin the season of Lent. Lent is a time when we reflect on our sinfulness and the need for a Savior, as we prepare for Good Friday and Easter Sunday. In many ways, Lent and Advent parallel each other. In Advent, we look forward in anticipation towards Christmas and the birth of Christ while at the same time thinking about the 2nd coming of Jesus, and in Lent we look forward to Easter Sunday and the resurrection and ascension of Jesus to Heaven, and the promise of His 2nd coming. In Advent we are excited to see God move by Him coming to us in an unexpected way, and in Lent we see God's hand moving again to bridge the gap between us and Him in another unexpected way.

If Advent is preparing us for the work of Christ beginning in the birth of God's own Son, Lent is preparing us for the fulfillment of the work of Christ in His death and resurrection. Last Advent we talked about what the manger meant to different people. This Lent we are bringing that same theme in and talking about what the cross meant to different parties. No one here today would deny the cross was a horrible, painful, humiliating way to die, but that is from our perspective some 2000 years removed. What did the cross mean to those who were there at the time, and what can we learn and apply to ourselves today that will make a difference in our lives?

Today, though, is like the prequel to that series. We're going to jump full force into the series next week by asking and answering the question, "What did the cross mean to God the Father?" Before we do that, though, we are going to lay the groundwork for the series this morning. Let me start by telling you a story.

There were these two little boys who were ice fishing in Michigan. The first little boy was having all the luck – he was just pulling fish right out of the water, one right after another. The second little boy wasn't catching anything, and they were fishing out of the same hole! And the first little boy was catching them, and the second little boy was just sitting there...and the first little boy was pulling them in and the second little boy was just watching...**and the first little boy!**...and the second little boy...**AND THE FIRST LITTLE BOY!**...and the second little boy...

Finally the second little boy couldn't take it any more. He turned to his friend and said "This is ridiculous. What's your secret?" And the first little boy answered "Mmouph mmama meep mour morms mrm."

The first little boy looked at him and said, "What?" And the second little boy answered, "Mmouph mmama meep mour morms mrm."

“WHAT?”

“MMOUPH MMAMA MEEP MOUR MORMS MRM!”

Finally the first little boy just had it and said, “Man, I can’t understand you. What did you say?”
The second little boy answered (spitting into his hand) “You gotta keep your worms warm!”

It’s amazing how things can make sense when we understand what exactly is being said and why. It’s amazing how we get caught up in the reasons behind things, and even more amazing how we’re stuck in neutral and not even able to move forward when we don’t understand something...when something doesn’t make sense to our 3 ½ pounds of brain.

In our Old Testament reading this morning, Abraham found himself in a similar situation. I invite you to open your Bibles to Genesis 22. Genesis is the first book in the Bible, and was written through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit by Moses while he led the Israelites in the desert for 40 years. The first five books of the Old Testament are called the Torah, or Pentateuch, and were all written by Moses while he was in the desert. Let’s review Abraham’s life for a moment, the ‘prequel’ to this reading this morning: a God there’s no indication he’s ever heard of comes to him and tells him to get up and leave his family, leave everything he knows and go to a strange place. Then this God promises childless Abraham and Sarah that they will become rich and a great nation of people will come from them. Finally, after Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 90, God comes through on His promise and the couple hold in their arms their little boy whom they named Isaac, which means ‘laughter’: they had laughed at God’s promise, and now they laughed with joy until they wept, and then they laughed at their tears.

It didn’t make any sense when Abraham was told to leave everything and go to a place he’d never been, it didn’t make any sense when Abraham and Sarah were promised a child, and it didn’t make any sense when they finally held the boy in their arms. And now, it REALLY doesn’t make any sense when God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son as a burnt offering. At least to Abraham it didn’t make any sense, anyway.

We’ve all had experiences that didn’t make any sense to us at the time. There were times when we were going along in life happy and secure, and then something came out of the blue that didn’t make any sense. Ever been side-railed by something that just shook your world?

Just ask the parents who watched their seven year old die of cancer. It didn’t make sense. He was a little boy with his whole life ahead of him. Every day they prayed that their child would recover. They even asked to have the cancer come into them and spare their little one. Now, the silence in the house is deafening, and where there was once the laughter of a child, there are the sobs of the parents.

Or ask the business woman who studied and worked and struggled to make her way up the corporate ladder. She did it right – played by the rules, didn’t cheat, cut corners or do anything to bring shame on herself. And then came the younger, slick, worker who lied, wormed, and brown-nosed his way to the top. Now instead of being the boss, the woman who worked so hard is spending her days answering to the new boss, and a little bit of the fire inside her has died.

Or talk to the family besieged by debt and struggling to make ends meet. Rumors kept circulating that there wasn’t enough work to keep a full crew at the shop. Then one Friday after a full week’s work came the announcement that the job was gone. The family used to pray it wouldn’t happen; now they pray that the next phone call won’t be from another collection agency. It doesn’t make a lot of difference actually – they can’t afford to pay the phone bill anyway and it’s going to be shut off soon. It doesn’t make sense: they are a hard working family, they go to church, they tithe, they volunteered for the VBS, they’re “good” people. Why them?

Or just ask Abraham who was asked to do the unthinkable. He and Sarah waited most of their lives for a child, and now that he’s here, now that the promise has been fulfilled, God is demanding Him back.

Or just ask the Son who was punished in the place of the Father’s other children. The Son never stole anything, but His hands are the ones being slapped. He never told a lie, but his mouth is the one being punched. He never kicked anyone, but His feet and legs are the ones being beaten. And what really doesn’t make sense is if you ask the Father, He says He loves His Son. If you ask the Son, He says He gladly takes the punishment for the other children. What kind of Father punishes one child for the other children’s actions? What kind of child willingly takes the punishment for others?

The answer: our Heavenly Father. His Son, our brother, Jesus the anointed one, took the punishment for your sins and mine. Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of Abraham when he told Isaac that God Himself would provide a lamb for the sacrifice. Abraham and Isaac walked away from Mount Moriah clean and untouched. You and I walk away clean from our sins and untouched by the punishment we deserve.

No, it doesn’t make any sense to our way of thinking. We can understand sticking worms in our mouth to keep them warm for ice fishing – that makes sense – but does it really make sense that God would not spare His only, perfect, Son? You can make a note of this in your Bibles: in verse 12 where God tells Abraham, “You have not withheld from me your son, your only son”, the word that gets translated ‘withheld’ is ‘*Chasak*’ and it means to stop an action from occurring, to cause to be free from danger, to cause to have a favorable circumstance, and so not be in a state of trouble or pain.

Understand what God is saying – Abraham did not manipulate the circumstances to stop what God told him to do from happening; to set Isaac free from danger; to keep his son from being in a state of trouble or pain.

God did not ‘chasak’, or spare, Jesus, either. Even though He knew the pain it would cost Him. Even though God the Father knew He would be so repulsed by the sins Jesus bore for you and me that He’d turn away from Jesus as He hung on the cross. Even though Jesus asked that He be spared the cross, to be chasak-ed so He would not have to go through the pain and humiliation and the hell of being separated from the Father.

And here is the good news for you and me and the foundation of our series: God does not allow us to be “chasak-ed” either. He doesn’t allow us to be spared from an action occurring, either. Do you know what that something is? God does not allow us to be spared His love. I invite you to write in the margins of your Bibles Romans 8:38-39“...*neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate, to chasak, us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*”

God loves you so much there is no more room for more love, and He will not love you less. His love for you is so great, that He did not spare His own Son, He didn’t ‘chasak’ Him, but instead allowed Him to suffer the punishment for your sins and mine. And now we have the promise as dearly loved children of God that nothing, **nothing, NOTHING** can remove us from the Father’s hands.

That’s what we cling to in those times when things don’t make sense. That’s what Abraham clung to when God came to him with an outrageous command. You can write the scripture reference Hebrews 11:17-19 in the margins of your Bibles: “*By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead.*”

God’s own Son was raised from the dead, and that is the place we put our faith. There may not be nice, easy, pat answers to our all our questions. Things that happen may not always make sense to us. Life can throw some curve balls from time to time, that’s for sure. We remember that we are always securely held in the Father’s hands, and no matter what, we can never be plucked from them. We can walk away, we can reject the gift of God’s grace, but we can never be pulled out of His hands.

This, then, lays the foundation for our series this Lent. As we look at the cross from different angles the next few weeks, the one thing we cling to is the love of God for us, as shown is the brutal, violent grace poured out for us on the cross. Does it make sense? Maybe yes, maybe no.

Does it mean life for those who believe? Absolutely. This word, “Chasak” is going to be a key word, or at least a key theme or component, of our series, and one that we will see again.

So now what? All that’s fine and good, but there’s still this afternoon, and tomorrow and the rest of the week. One of my favorite quotes is from a man named Rich Mullins. He was a singer, a poet, he wrote many devotions and deeply theological pieces of prose. One of the things he said was “everything that could be shaken was shaken. All that remaind was all I ever really had” based on Hebrews 12:27.¹ When those things that don’t make sense come at us, we remember Christ and what we do have, what we are assured of: God’s love that doesn’t end, the perfect plan and will for our lives the Father has for us, as He tells us in Jeremiah 29:11, “*I know the plans I have for you... plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.*” Most importantly, we remember the cross that held Jesus and the tomb that couldn’t. There lies the solid foundation we build our lives on. There lies the one thing that cannot, *will not*, be moved.

There lies the hope and the comfort we have when things don’t make sense.

Amen

¹ Mullins, Rich, *Winds of Heaven, Stuff of Earth*