

ENTERING THE PASCHAL MYSTERY

John 3:14-21

Preached by Dr. Cahill

Babcock Presbyterian Church

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Today, even though it is not yet Good Friday, come with me to the foot of the cross and the paschal mystery. But before you can enter into this paschal mystery I better first define the word paschal so you know what you're getting into.

Paschal comes from the Hebrew work Pasch which means "Passover." When Jews celebrate Pasch they remember how the Hebrews were instructed to smear the blood of the slain Passover Lamb over their doorways so the Angel of Death would "pass over" their homes the night before their exodus or escape. So, the paschal lamb was the sacrificial lamb slain for their last supper in bondage. The next day God, through Moses, would lead his chosen people out of Egypt and begin their journey to the Promised Land.

It was John the Baptist who first called his cousin Jesus "...the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1:29) thereby forever identifying Jesus as the new paschal lamb who would die for our sins and whose blood would cause the Angel of Death to pass over us.

The theme for this meditation is all about entering into the mystery of Jesus, the Lamb of God. My hope this morning is to point you one step closer to the cross so you can better know and trust in our Lord and Savior. I said "know and trust." Faith is much more than knowledge. Faith is acting on that knowledge, believing that what you know is true enough for you to stake your life on it. Think about holding on for dear life at the edge of a cliff as your rescuer establishes a trust level with you; you know he has the credentials to save you but then that moment of truth comes and he says, "Give me your hand." Will you take it?

So faith is not just knowing your rescuer is strong enough and willing to save you, it's acting on that knowledge and putting your life in his hands.

When you enter into the Paschal Mystery you are invited and encouraged to put your life in Jesus' hands. What do I mean by "your life?" Everything about you. Your habits, your finances, your relationships, your career, your health, your fears and worries, your sins, and last to top it all off your call to discipleship or servant hood. Everything about you is on the table. God wants your entire life in his hands. And thank God our God is long-suffering and patient because God knows how we tend to hold back and try to keep at least some of

your life off the table. Thankfully God is willing to wait for us to come to our senses and then trust him with even “that” part of our lives.

Now, having defined the word “paschal” and identifying Jesus as the paschal lamb we should next define the word mystery, because you are being invited to enter a mystery.

What do I mean by mystery? Usually when you hear the word mystery you may think of a detective solving a mystery by painstakingly putting together all the clues and then through logic and reason solving what was once a mystery, and making it as plain as day. That’s not what I’m taking about. The Pascal mystery is not a mystery you are expected to solve and then understand. Instead, when we speak of the mystery of God we are talking about divine, unexplainable secrets far beyond our comprehension that only God can reveal and then embracing it. Remember faith is not just knowing something is true, it’s staking your life on it. Believing means trusting the unknown and unsearchable. And you can only trust in the mystery because you trust in the source of the mystery, God in Christ. So the goal is not to solve the mystery of God, but to allow the mystery of God solve you.

Hopefully I have identified what I mean by the Pascal Mystery and now I’d like you to consider how you can approach and then enter into the Mystery so you can encounter Jesus, crucified on the cross, suffering and dying for you. And yes, you are being invited to enter into the mystery of Christ’s suffering. It’s not as fun as entering into the mystery of Christmas Christ being born in a stable surrounded by loving parents, angels, shepherds and wise men. This is the painful mystery with the babe of Bethlehem now hanging on a cross this time surrounded by his accusers and an angry mob.

By entering into this mystery you are being asked to be crucified with him, that is, trusting that “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world,” is especially taking your sins with him as well.

Now, if you are willing to enter into the mystery of Christ’s suffering you need to have some sense of how Jesus suffered.

I think I can say this without fear of contradiction, any of us could experience the same degree of physical suffering Jesus endured, but none of us could ever even begin to experience his spiritual suffering.

In this morning’s gospel lesson we find that curious verse that cries out for commentary.

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. (John 3:14-15)

In Numbers you can find the strange story of the Jews failing again and again to trust in God, suffering the consequences of their disobedience. Deadly poisonous snakes are plaguing God's children. As an antidote God instructed Moses to make a bronze image of the serpent and lift it up high in the middle of their encampment, so that anyone bitten by the poisonous snakes would be healed. So Jesus is predicting that at the right time, he, like that bronze serpent, would be lifted up high so that all who look upon him will be saved.

Consider the implications of this. God instructed Moses to make an image of the very thing that was killing the Hebrews and made it the antidote for their healing. So, like the serpent, Jesus became the personification of sin and death, by taking on all the sins of the world, all the murders, rapes, blasphemies and corruptions committed by mankind were crammed into his body and soul, even though he himself was completely innocent, even though he himself was without sin, he became sin, to the point that even God in heaven had to turn away and abandon his only son.

For three hours Jesus faced separation from his beloved Father. No one else before him, and no one else after him could or would ever endure the agonizing spiritual suffering he endured so you and I would never have to experience it for ourselves.

So, as you intentionally make your way towards the annual observance of Christ's passion, first on Maundy Thursday and then on Good Friday, you are being invited to enter into the mystery of the Paschal Lamb who takes away the sins of the world. God is giving you the opportunity to lay your sins and fears at the foot of the cross and you are also encouraged to enter into his suffering, to connect with him on the deepest level possible. You can't suffer what he suffered, but you can stay with him and declare your deepest thanks and devotion for all he has done for us all.

One of my favorite hymns speaks to this spirit of gratitude experienced by any sinner who realizes the great price Christ paid to buy our salvation.

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of Glory died
My richest gain I count as loss
And pour contempt on all my pride.

See from his hand, his head, his feet
Sorrow and love flow mingled down,
Did ever such love and sorrow meet
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Were the whole realm of nature mine
That were a present far too small

Love so amazing so divine
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

My friends in Christ, don't let this Lenten season pass without you making time to stand at the foot of your Master's cross. It's the least you can do for him, considering all he has done for you. Confess your sins, repent and believe in Him, trust your life to him by committing yourself to him as your Lord and Savior. Enter into the Pascal mystery. The Lamb of God is waiting for you.