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The Foolishness of the Cross
I Corinthians 1:18-31

We all remember certain news footage and photos from September 11—the crash, the rubble at ground zero, the firefighters raising the flag. But the most touching picture to me, and arguably one of the most poignant is that of a cross standing in the midst of the debris.

It was the cross on the spire of St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox church, set against the background of the collapsed towers.

Somehow the church collapsed, but the cross remained intact.

To see a cross standing in the middle of such terror and death was shocking. To see a cross amidst piles of concrete, mounds of steel, and little pieces of people's lives....well, it also gets you thinking.

When my theology professor from seminary saw that photo, he urged Christians to find strength in a 'theology of the cross'. In other words we should all learn what the cross really means.

He went on to say, "*When it is time for me to speak, I want my remarks to begin, continue, and end with reference to the cross of Jesus Christ. To understand and believe in the cross is to bear witness to God's strange presence in events that overwhelm us with a sense of God's apparent absence. The love of God is decisively revealed in deep darkness. God's love is always victorious over evil, even when evil seems completely triumphant.*"

Christians working after the earthquake in Haiti, and right now after the devastating quake and tsunami in Japan, say the same things---somehow God is present, even in the darkest of circumstances, even when whole towns have been wiped out, when a half-million have no housing, when brave men must subject themselves to radiation to save millions of other people in their country. God is there.

Not up in the sky looking down. Not over here looking over there. God is in the midst of people's pain and suffering.

That's one of the things we believe about the cross---that Jesus entered our suffering, and still stands with us through it today.

On September 11th, after hearing and seeing the attack, the pastors of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian in New York City opened all the church doors and stood out on the sidewalk, arms outstretched to welcome the people streaming by.

They were just blocks from Ground Zero, so they saw people literally running for their lives, and they welcomed them into the church for solace. For hours they hugged, cried and prayed with bewildered people, some collapsing in grief, others just frantically searching for loved ones.

They held prayer services every two hours and had over 2000 non-members come for prayer, many without any religious affiliation at all.

Each service began with Psalm 46, which was such a comforting word to so many. Dozens wanted to know where the readings were from, so the church started copying scriptures for the crowds.

People were desperate to hear about a God who knows what it's like to be in the middle of suffering, disaster, even death on a cross. People who had never darkened the door of a church wanted to hear more about this Savior who knows our pain, a God in the midst of suffering.

For months this and other NYC churches became homes and hospitals for grieving families and rescue workers.

Pews were cots, kitchens were fired up around the clock, and Christians joined the recovery efforts. Churches were filled with dust, smoke, death, and mourning. It was at times difficult to proclaim the good news, but it was never difficult to talk of Jesus Christ crucified.

Paul's words to the Corinthians take on a profound meaning in times of pain: *The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*

Horrible disasters always raise some serious questions though, questions about theodicy, the problem of good and evil. Like if God is all good and all powerful, why allow such suffering and evil? We've all wondered, and different people have suggested different answers.

- 1) Some people choose to say it just must be God's will, God intended for those 3,000 to die in the twin towers, or the thousands in Japan, or hundreds in Haiti. God brings the good and the bad alike to us. Problem is, then we have to doubt that God is all good and all loving.

- 2) Others, like Rabbi Harold Kushner who wrote *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, have said that God is not all powerful. He suggests that God has limited God's power in the world on purpose, so some things are just beyond God's control.

There is another way to look at it though.

Through the cross of Jesus Christ.

Why does God allow evil and suffering?

Maybe it's because we are allowed to have free will; the whole creation was allowed to fall into sin and brokenness; it's a fallen broken messy world we live in.

And instead of asking why does an all powerful God allow it, we should be asking "Where is our God?"

And the answer is found in the cross of Jesus Christ.

Our Savior came and suffered some of the worst cruelty anyone could suffer.

He chose to become one of us, to know our brokenness and our vulnerability.

Hebrews 2:17-18 says, "*He was like us in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest...he himself was tested by what he suffered, so he is able to help us.*"

Where's God when it rains and pours disaster in our lives?

God is right in the midst of us. God is suffering with us.

God is grieving over the disasters all around us, just as we are,

God is hurt when we hurt, and sad when we are sad.

Isaiah 43 says, *when you walk through the waters I will be with you....*

To find God's power in the cross doesn't completely make sense, it's not totally logical or reasonable. Paul said, "*We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles*". The Greek word for stumbling block is scandalon—the root of our word scandal. The word for foolishness is where we get the word moronic.

A Savior on a cross? God on death row, volunteering for lethal injection on behalf of ordinary criminals?

But Paul insists that yes. "*God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.*"

When we choose to believe that Jesus died for us on the cross,
That Jesus took on the same suffering and hardship so that he would know exactly
what we go through....so much so that he could defeat sin and death...slowly now,
but forever when he returns...

When we choose to believe in Christ crucified
it doesn't help us to make sense of the world,
it becomes the only wisdom and understanding we need to make it in the world. As
Paul said, "*Since the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided,
through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe.*"

To have faith in a crucified Savior is not self-serving,
and certainly not wise according to the world—because it doesn't necessarily make
your life any easier. We don't just name what we want from God and get it like a
Genie in a bottle.

Jesus' obedience led him to a cross. Paul's faith led him to many hardships.
Christian author Philip Yancey says, "*We should not confuse God with life.
Life is messy, sinful, and painful; but God is always good.*"

We have faith in this Jesus who died for us on the cross,
because he did that for us. Because he was raised again, and is always with us.
We follow him because he knows us, and he forgives us.

In the cross is the good news of Jesus' presence, strength, and grace.
And on that cross is the defeat of sin and death!
The foolish cross is actually a Christian's greatest strength. *I Cor 1:30: He is the
source of our life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God,
righteousness, and sanctification and redemption.*

We don't follow Jesus because he makes our lives easier.
After all, when we follow Jesus we confront the darkness inside ourselves,
not just out there in the world!

We follow because Jesus is God for us and with us, and in us.
Because Jesus brings us the only truly new and everlasting life.
And because following Jesus brings joy—
in spite of and in the midst of all the mess of life.

Right now people are digging through rubble in Japan looking for mementos,
and the broken bodies of husbands, wives, sons, and daughters.
They sift through a seemingly God-forsaken mess because lives were lost,
and lives depend upon this recovery.

Christians are working there in the midst of this mess, offering prayer and hope,
because we believe in the cross—God’s very presence in the midst of devastation.
And if we choose to follow Christ, we pick up our own crosses
and we follow right behind him.
If we choose to follow Jesus,
our view of the world is forever changed.

During Lent we journey with Jesus—to the cross and finally the resurrection.
And before we can even think about the empty tomb,
we must stand at the foot of the cross.
We must take time to look upon our Savior with nails pounded into hands
and feet, a loving God beaten, stripped, and crowned with thorns.
We will behold an innocent man dying a painful, shameful death.

For the empty tomb is meaningless without the power of the cross.
We really cannot understand the glory of Easter until we grasp the meaning of the
cross.

Friends, let us find our faith in the power of the cross—
the presence of God in deep darkness,
the strength of god in suffering,
the forgiveness of God for sin,
and the new life from God made possible by Jesus death
and resurrection. And may we all look at the cross with
just a little more love. Amen.