

LIFT HIGH THE CROSS – Part 4
It Was the Will of the Lord...or WAS It?

Genesis 22:1-14

John 19:16-18

Mark 15:33-34

Isaiah 53: Selected Verses

Preached by Pastor Rob Fulton
First United Presbyterian Church
Bellefontaine, Ohio

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Now, let's be HONEST about it! I don't know how it is for YOU, but for ME, that God should **WILL** the death of Jesus may be the single hardest thing that I, as a Christian, am asked to believe. And yet, that is EXACTLY what not only the Scriptures tell us...but what our Christian faith down through the ages has taught us as well. *"It was the WILL OF THE LORD that he should suffer... his death a SACRIFICE to bring forgiveness,"* the prophet Isaiah writes. (Isa. 53:10) The virgin birth...the miracles...Jesus walking on water – these things may PUZZLE us. We may even decide we can get along just fine without them. But Jesus death on the cross is simply a NON-NEGOTIABLE. It is the BEDROCK of our faith. And according to the historic teachings of the church, it happened because God PLANNED for it to happen...because God MADE it happen...because God WILLED it to happen. Plainly and simply, it was no ACCIDENT that Jesus died on the cross. It is precisely what God INTENDED.

We call it, of course, the ATONEMENT – the idea being that Jesus death on the cross PAID for our sins. Our sins were...and are...SO BAD, we are told...our rebellion against God SO GREAT...that God's divine justice DEMANDED that a SACRIFICE be made – a BLOOD sacrifice – that would pay the price so that we can be FORGIVEN of our sins rather than PUNISHED with the death we so rightly deserve. And the only way for that price to be paid...the only way for that demand to be satisfied...was for SOMEONE to die...for someone's BLOOD to be shed...for someone's LIFE to be taken in our place. And that SOMEONE was Jesus...God's OWN son...the divine self made flesh...the CRUCIFIED ONE who set us free by taking our place in death. In other words, Jesus' died on the cross in order to meet God's demand that a sacrifice be made to pay for our sins. Or so the theory of the atonement goes.

And yet, I've got to be honest and tell you that I've got a PROBLEM with all of that. And I'm not the ONLY one. Writer and theologian Marcus Borg says that under such a theory there is no getting around the fact that God KILLED Jesus. Dorothee Solle calls it little more than *"sadistic theology."* It's *"worshiping the EXECUTIONER,"* she says...and she wants no part of it. And Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel apparently AGREES with her. Remembering the Old Testament story of Abraham and Isaac, Wiesel says that the main difference between Judaism and Christianity is that on Mt. Moriah, the father did NOT kill the son, while at Calvary...on Golgatha...God DID. And for THAT reason, Wiesel says, he is eternally grateful that God made him a Jew and NOT a Christian.

So what are we to make of it all? Where WAS Jesus' ram in the thicket to take his place? Where WAS Jesus' army of angels with flaming swords swooping down to pry Jesus off the cross and spirit him away? Why, even a voice from HEAVEN would have been sufficient. *"STOP THIS NONSENSE RIGHT NOW! You're making a TERRIBLE MISTAKE!!!!"*

Only there WAS no voice...no army of angels...no ram in a thicket to take Jesus' place. HE was the sacrifice. And as Jesus hung there on the cross, crying out, *"My God, my God, WHY have you abandoned me?"* ... while the very LIFE-BLOOD drained out of him, God remained silent. But then, maybe that's why we call it the WILL OF GOD. Because if God had not WILLED it...if God had not ORDAINED it...it would NEVER have happened. The Son of God would SURELY NOT have died

on the cross – or so we often CLAIM. But that assumes that we live in a universe in which there are no other powers operating OTHER than the power of God. And I'm not so sure that's true. Let me show you what I mean.

From the very beginning of creation, God has chosen to SHARE POWER...to share power with US – giving US the power to name...to create...to choose...to act...to follow...to answer...to respond – or NOT– as WE decide. It's called FREE WILL. And it is, we believe, what MAKES us human. And as human beings, we have done some wonderful things with that free will. We have done some loving and kind and generous and helpful and life-giving things with that power. But we have also ABUSED it...doing some evil and cruel and hateful and destroying things as well. The DARK side of our power, you see...the NEGATIVE side of our free will...is the power to RESIST God...to say NO to God...and thereby to THWART what God is trying to do in our lives and in our world...at least temporarily. Oh, we like to tell ourselves that our resisting of God is basically harmless...that it really won't affect much of anything...that God will step back in and do things GOD'S way, no matter whether we say "Yes!" to God or whether we say "NO!" And that, I think, is ultimately true...but only in the long range...ULTIMATE sense of things.

But what if God DOESN'T immediately step back in and set things straight again? What if God doesn't work that way? What if God really HAS limited God's own power in order to give US power and we really CAN mess things up? And what if God LETS us?

When you stop and think about it, that possibility paints a much DIFFERENT view of the world in which we live. Instead of everything happening because an all-powerful god WILLS it to happen, what if things sometimes happen in our world because WE, in our power to RESIST God, cause it to happen...NOT God? What if, because God has chosen to SHARE power with us, OUR will clashes with GOD'S will so that the outcome confounds EVEN God?

Several weeks ago, I stood right here in front of you and said that Jesus death on the cross was NO ACCIDENT...that it was PRECISELY what God intended. I stood before you and proclaimed that God wasn't STUMPED by an evil world...that God wasn't DONE IN by humanity's sinfulness...that God wasn't even SURPRIZED by our lack of faith or the depths of our failure which ended up putting Jesus to death on the cross. But what if God WAS? What if God's WILL for Jesus, instead of being death on a cross, had been something ENTIRELY DIFFERENT – something like a long life and great success spreading the Good News of the Gospel...proclaiming the love of God...turning people back toward a right relationship with God and with each other...and building up the Kingdom of God on earth? What if Jesus' all-too-early death on the cross was not the FULFILLMENT of God's divine plan, but the ultimate FRUSTRATION of it...humanity's NO to God's will...humankind's ultimate REJECTION of God's divine intent?

That then casts a whole different light on the cross, doesn't it? Instead of dying to pay the debt of our sin, what if Jesus died simply because he encountered a sinful humanity which was hell-bent on saying NO! to what God was trying to do in and through Jesus. What if Jesus died because he wouldn't stop being who he WAS...and who he was was very upsetting...especially to the political and religious POWER STRUCTURE of his day...to those who wanted to KEEP things the way they were and would do anything...ANYTHING to get rid of someone who got in their way. After all, Jesus' whole notion of the Kingdom of God where the first become last and the last become first and a little child shall lead them turned EVERYTHING upside down. He allied himself with all the "WRONG" kind of people – the poor, the outcast, the downtrodden, the powerless, the un-pure...the prostitutes and tax collectors...the lepers and beggars – and he INSULTED all the "RIGHT" kind of people – the rich and powerful...the religious and political leaders of his day...the movers and shakers in society...the law-keepers and jot-and-tittle minders. He IGNORED their propriety. He CHALLENGED their authority. He THUMBED his nose at their conventional ways of thinking. And they WARNED him to stop. The GOVERNMENT officials... the RELIGIOUS leaders...the keepers of the official STATUS-QUO...they ALL warned him to stop. But he WOULDN'T stop because he was doing God's will. And so they KILLED him...nailed him to a cross...THEIR power thwarting what GOD'S power was trying to do.

Some say, of course, that at any point along the way, Jesus COULD have AVOIDED the cross. He could have stopped operating the open and gone underground instead. He could have stopped being such an activist and started writing books instead. He could have stopped helping

other people and helped himself instead. He could have stopped being who he was...who God had CALLED him to be...and played it safe. But he DIDN'T. And when the soldiers showed up in the garden to arrest him, instead of simply disappearing into the darkness...which he could have easily done when he heard them coming...he stepped into the light of their torches and asked them who it was that they were looking for.

"*Jesus of Nazareth,*" they answered him. So Jesus said simply "*I am he.*" (Or as the Greek of the New Testament actually reads, "*He is who I am!*") Later, appearing before the kangaroo court of religious authorities whose interest Jesus so greatly threatened, the High Priest asked Jesus "*Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed God?*" And again, Jesus answered simply, "*I AM!*" (Mark 14:62) "*I AM,*" Jesus said. Which, in case you don't remember, is EXACTLY the name God gave to God's SELF when Moses asked who is was that was sending him back to Egypt to tell old Pharaoh to "*Let my people go!*" "*My name is 'I AM!'*" God said. "*Tell them 'I AM' sent you!?*" In other words, in identifying himself to the guards...AND in answering the High Priest's question...Jesus was claiming the name of God...which, of course, only INFURIATED the Jewish authorities even further and made them MORE determined to get rid of this Jesus once and for all. How DARE he claim the name of God! BLASPHEMY!

"*I AM,*" of course, the ONLY answer Jesus could have given the High Priest that day. Except, of course, if WAS the only answer he could have given. Because it was how he had chosen to live his life...to use his power FOR God rather than AGAINST God...to join his "YES!" to God's "YES!" for all humanity's sake.

If Jesus had DENIED who he was, he might well have SAVED his life...but it's pretty clear he would have LOST it too. Who would he have been after that? A "more or less" Messiah? An "almost" Lord who "almost" had what it took, but not quite...not in the end?

Lucky for us, that's NOT what happened, of course. Jesus HAD what it took, you see! And he gave ALL that he had...opening himself up to ALL that his "YES!" to God's way in his life brought...even when it brought death...even death on a cross.

I guess you could say, then, that if the cross was in any sense the DEFEAT of God's will, then it was also the FULFILLMENT of it. Jesus chose to bear the consequences of being who he was and died with the same integrity with which he lived. And in-so-far as it was the "will of the Lord" that he should live like that, then I suppose God's will also included the possibility of his death – NOT as something God WILLED, mind you...but as something God SUFFERED.

Which, in the end, makes Christianity the only religion in the world that confesses a God who SUFFERS. Oh, it's not all that popular an idea, I must confess, even among Christians. We prefer an all POWERFUL God who PREVENTS suffering...who steps in with bolts of lightning and peals of thunder and armies of angels to KEEP suffering from happening...who sends voices from heaven and rams in thickets to get us out of tight situations. And maybe God DOES act that way...SOMETIMES. But not ALL the time...not by any means. More often than not, I think, God refuses to use His power to FORCE people to love him or follow him. And whether we like it or not, MOST often God won't even use his power to end human pain and suffering...not EVEN for his own son.

Instead, what God WILL do is to go to WHATEVER cross we're enduring to suffer there WITH us...helping us to pick up the shattered pieces of our lives and make something HOLY out of them...not "from a distance" (as Bette Midler sang in a song several years ago)...but from right up close...right smack dab in the MIDST of us. Which is PRECISELY what God did with Jesus...the incarnation of God's very self into the midst of human life. By entering into the experience of the cross WITH Jesus, God took humanity's rejection of God's will...God took humanity's "NO!" to what God intended through Jesus...and SUFFERED with it. For nearly THREE DAYS in the tomb, he suffered with it. And he did not let go of that suffering until he could TRANSFORM it all and return it back to Jesus...and to US...as LIFE – RESURRECTED life. THAT, I believe, when you get right down to it, was what the WILL OF THE LORD was ultimately all about – a will that did not PLAN...or INTEND...or DESIRE the Jesus' death on the cross in any way, shape or form...but which took humanity's REJECTION of God's will – which took humankind's "NO!" to God's will – and turned it right around with the "YES!" of the resurrection. Finally and ultimately, the resurrection is God's "YES!" to humanity's "NO!"

So what do YOU think? WAS IT the “will of the Lord” that Jesus should suffer and die a horrible, agonizing death on the cross in order to provide a human sacrifice...a “blood offering”...in order to APPEASE God’s anger...in order to ATONE for our sins? I don’t know for sure, of course...but I don’t think so! That may have been what Jesus’ death on the cross ended up doing. That may have been the ultimate consequence. But I don’t think it was God’s ORIGINAL INTENT. I’m not just sure it WAS “the will of the Lord.” I believe God’s WILL was that Jesus live among us...as GOD among us... to teach us...to show us...to model for us...to make it POSSIBLE for us...to live in a loving, gracious, full and complete relationship with God...AND with our fellow human beings. In other words, I think God’s original intent was for Jesus to show us what life is really...TRULY...supposed to be like. But when what God intended in Jesus became too much of a threat to our sinful, self-centered way of life...when we – when humanity – decided to go its OWN sinful way instead of GOD’S way...we REJECTED God’s will. We said “NO!” to God’s intent. And God LET us do it. And THAT is why Jesus died on the cross...not as GOD’S will, but as HUMANITY will.

But here’s the thing! God simply REFUSED to allow humanity the last word. God REFUSED to allow God’s intent to be thwarted. God REDEEMED Jesus death, raised him from the dead and brought him back to life again...so that he might CONTINUE living in our midst...as God WITH us...CONTINUING to reveal to us God’s ultimate will.

The question of course, now as always, is: Will we listen? Will we pay attention? Will we follow? Or will we continue to say “NO!” to the will of the Lord...even when God REPEATEDLY says “YES!”

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