

“INCARNATING LOVE”

John 1:1-5, 14; Philippians 2:1-11

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The Italian Jewish writer Primo Levi was a survivor of Auschwitz. When he wrote about how he survived, he remembered Lorenzo, the man who smuggled soup and bread to him every day. But it wasn't only the food that saved Levi. He wrote, "I am alive ... not so much because of Lorenzo's material aid, as for his having constantly reminded me by his presence, by his plain and gentle manner of being good, that there still existed a just world outside our own, something and someone still pure and whole."

What Lorenzo gave to Levi was hope. The food he brought was part of it, and also for sure the sacrifice he made and the risks he took to do so... but he himself was the evidence that love and justice were real.

I don't know about you, but I'm finding the world a frightening place these days. The bad news just rolls in relentlessly, day after day.

The other day I saw pictures of people in Haiti, gathered for worship in the ruins of their once-beautiful churches. I heard on the news about a wildfire in California more than 100 square miles in size; I can't even picture it.

My brother-in-law who lives north of New Orleans expects to be without power for a month, and they are much better off than communities to the south where no homes at all are left standing.

We are beginning to have climate refugees even here in our own country; whole communities that have been repeatedly subjected to extreme weather are disappearing, as homes are destroyed and people move away and schools and businesses never reopen because there are no funds to rebuild from the last disaster or protect from the next one.

Then there are the Afghan refugees; I can't even imagine their trauma, or the daunting challenges ahead of them. And those left behind in uncertainty and fear for the future. And the grief for all the lives lost.

And the pandemic goes on - hospitals at capacity while people attack public health officials for doing their jobs.

I'm getting more and more concerned about the support – here at home as well as abroad - for authoritarian governments and ideas; I thought we had put that behind us.

Meanwhile all the things that seem to be chronically broken in our world are still broken, and sliding into crisis... and the excuses are depressingly familiar. And it feels like we are drowning in toxic levels of anxiety, depression, anger, self-medicating, denial, lies.

It all feels so ominous. So much suffering. So much cruelty and indifference. So many destructive forces set in motion and now seemingly unstoppable. So many losses. So much need.

It can be really hard to believe that goodness is stronger than evil... hard to keep believing that the moral arc of the universe bends to justice, eventually... hard to believe in a hopeful future.

This summer's sermon series has focused on Jesus' life – his words, his interactions with others, the healings and miracles he performed, the places he went and things he did. Not theological *ideas* about Jesus, but his person and the way he lived. We can't wrap up a sermon series about Jesus' life without talking a little about his death... about the cross. Which almost inevitably involves talking about theological ideas.

There are SO many ways to think about the cross. To go into all of them would be a Good Friday sermon, which this isn't. But whenever we talk about Jesus death on the cross, we end up touching on suffering and sacrifice, and what they mean.

Sometimes when we talk about Jesus' death as a sacrifice, we describe it as Jesus paying a penalty, demanded by God, for our sin... so that we don't have to pay it. That way of conceptualizing it offers a lot of food for thought, but it also has some limitations and problems. This is, I think, particularly true when our interpretive lens is "what does the life of Jesus mean for us who are trying to follow him?"

First of all, it doesn't take adequate account of Jesus' death on the cross as real human suffering – physical, emotional, spiritual. The cross has so much resonance, across cultures and generations, it has become *the* emblem of suffering, because it speaks deeply to our human experience. Everybody suffers. It's part of being human. We suffer in different ways, and we'd probably all agree that some people's lives are filled with much more suffering than others (although we might disagree about how those comparisons might be made). But suffering is universal. So it's really powerful for us to see Jesus sharing in that suffering. It makes us less alone in our suffering, maybe even helps us to find meaning in our suffering at times. Jesus shows us that love can persist and endure even the worst suffering. In some sense, Jesus' suffering helps us to honor and respect all human suffering, including our own. This is not a small thing.

Second, the cross-as-paying-a-debt kind of separates Jesus' death from his life. It's almost as if nothing else the gospels tell and show us about who Jesus was matters much. But we *do* have all these stories of Jesus' life. And we can see in those stories how that life led to the cross. We can see that the context of Jesus' life was a culture where injustice and violence and corruption and fear made such a thing as the cross possible. The cross is a visible indictment of a world in

which power is used to oppress, and an invitation to see power differently. The cross is solidarity with the oppressed and suffering. The cross is a challenge to join Jesus in that solidarity.

And finally, for me, the way we often speak about the cross is just too... transactional: God requires this price. Jesus pays. The deal is done (pending our acceptance). The language of commerce or law reduces the mystery of divine grace and sacrificial love to something overly simplistic and coldly impersonal. Plus it leaves a lot of unanswered questions, not the least of which is “why does God ‘need’ to do this?” It’s a troubling picture of God. And one that is significantly at odds with what Jesus has told us and shown us of God.

And that’s why Jesus matters to us, isn’t it? Because we believe that he was God with us.

It seems to me that the sacrifice in Jesus’ life *was* his life. His self-giving was not just the cross, but his whole life - the healing, teaching, caring, feeding, befriending, touching, weeping ... being born into a human life in the first place. This was and is so much more than a businesslike transaction. What Jesus brought us wasn’t a paid bill or a ticket to heaven, but *himself*. He himself was the embodiment, the incarnation of love. God’s love made visible, as the song says. And the cross is the evidence that nothing can shake that love.

In a hopeless world, *that’s* our hope.

Following Jesus means that we, too, incarnate that sacrificial love – that the love of God is made real, visible, alive, embodied in us – stubbornly, boldly, persistently, every day. It may not be rational, but it’s the only way.

The poet W.H. Auden wrote “We must love one another or die.”

It’s great if we follow the commandments. Believe at least some of what we’re supposed to believe. Be honest. Feed people. Do other good things. But the hope our world craves is more than food, more than money we send to help in times of need, more than volunteer hours, or words of sympathy – necessary though all that is. But the need is deeper than resources and actions; the world needs people whose love gives others reason to hope. I don’t think that there’s any better way to think about what it means to follow Jesus. A song I love has this line, a prayer: “When the world is night... shine my life like a light.”

That was Jesus’ life. That’s our life, following him.

Resources:

Primo Levi, *If this Is a Man*

“Let It Be Me” music and lyrics by Emily Ann Saliers (Indigo Girls)