

## **“What Are You Waiting For?”**

**First Presbyterian Church  
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**Old Testament Lesson: Jeremiah 31:31-34**

**New Testament Lesson: Hebrews 9:24-28**

In the late '80s, Martin Scorsese released a film titled the “Last Temptation of Christ,” starring Willem Defoe. In it, Jesus reaches Jerusalem, cleansing of the Temple, and receives a sign from God that he must die on the cross to bring us salvation. Jesus is arrested by Pontius Pilate, beaten and whipped. A crown of thorns is placed on his head, and he is crucified.

While on the cross, he is approached by a young girl claiming to be his guardian angel. She tells him that, although he is the Son of God, he is not the Messiah, and that God is pleased with him, and wants him to be happy. She brings him down off the cross and takes him to Mary Magdalene, whom he marries. He starts a family and lives his life in peace. Many years later, an elderly, bedridden Jesus is surrounded by his disciples and Judas reveals that the youthful angel who released Jesus from the crucifixion is in fact Satan.

Crawling back through the burning city of Jerusalem, Jesus reaches the site of his crucifixion and prayerfully begs God to let him fulfill his purpose. Instantly, Jesus is back on the cross, having overcome the last temptation of escaping death. And we all know how the movie ends. Jesus cries out, “It is accomplished!” and with that, he brings humanity into salvation, restores our relationship with God and one another.

Given that that’s what Jesus did on the cross, why do we struggle in our relationship with God and one another? Well, it has to do with the difference between Martin Scorsese’s vision of the crucifixion and God’s, God’s vision for our lives and our world in light of the crucifixion.

While everything comes out OK at the end of that movie, there is a big difference between that story and the true crucifixion of Jesus Christ. In the Scorsese film, Jesus is on the cross, not once, but twice.

Why is it important that Jesus is crucified once for all, as Hebrews says in today’s New Testament lesson? The importance comes from drawing a distinction between the work of Jesus compared to the work of priests at the time Hebrews was written.

But why is that distinction important? Because, it has everything to do with how we understand our relationship with God and one another, and the misguided, sinful things we say and do.

Consider, for instance, the guy who said, “When I was young, I used to pray for a bike, then I realized that God doesn’t work that way. So I stole a bike and prayed for forgiveness. The misguided, sinful things we say and do. No one is without sin. We all fall short when it comes to living pure and holy lives, treating our neighbors as ourselves, turning the other cheek when someone lashes out at us, putting our love of God ahead of our love of money, power and self-sufficiency.

It is so important for us to understand this, because without a firm grasp of our spiritual weakness, we cannot fully embrace Jesus. And without Jesus, we have no access to the power of God to transform our lives from selfishness to service, from power-hungry to loving, from money-grubbing to generosity, from revenge to embrace, from struggle to abundance.

We may think that God gives us and all people a divine purpose in life, unconditional love and acceptance, and an abundance of spiritual and material blessings, and that is true. But what is also true is that, while God gives freely, there is a cost, a cost to accepting those God-given gifts, the gift of a holy purpose in life, an unconditional love for others and ourselves, and the blessings of a life of abundance.

The price we pay is what it takes for us to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Not just saying it, but having it show up in how we live our lives in our reliance upon Christ. Not reliance upon ourselves, not reliance upon our government, not even reliance upon your family and friends, if it means counting on them over and above God. Anytime we let something or someone other than God take the lead in our lives, we are giving up the gift of salvation that Jesus brings to us.

And this includes how we relate to our sinful nature. When we focus too much on ourselves and our worries, over and above the power of the Lord, we miss out on the salvation Jesus brings. One of our greatest struggles in relying upon Christ is to resist the temptation to take Jesus down from the cross and then climb up there ourselves.

What I mean by that is we have a tendency to forget that Jesus has paid the price for our sin, our shortfalls, our misguided ways. It’s when we forget about Jesus that we obsess over the things we’ve done – or left undone. That’s when we crucify ourselves instead of accepting the Lord’s forgiveness. Anyone here relate to that? Sure, we all do. Or maybe we come to terms with our sinfulness but fail to repent and turn toward God.

In that case, we are ignoring the price that Jesus paid for our salvation, cheapen his sacrifice, by not turning to God for the strength to do better, choose more wisely. This is why Hebrews spends so much time talking about Christ's work of salvation – so that we don't forget it or ignore it.

You know, the truth is we have it easier than people at the time of Hebrews. The Jews at that time found it harder to understand the salvific work of Jesus Christ because they already had priests who were doing the same thing Jesus did, or so it seemed to them. Every priest at the time had three things unique to the priestly office: a sanctuary, a central place in the covenant between God and humanity, and a role in making a sacrifice on behalf of the people.

So Hebrews draws a distinction between what the priests did and what Jesus did, saying, "Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf."

Can you imagine being in the presence of God without Jesus by your side? Apart from Christ, we all stand in judgment before God, and we all fall terribly short of acceptance before God, apart from Christ. That is just how important Jesus is to us. If it were not so, why would God send his only son to sacrifice his life on our behalf? There would be no need; we'd be fine on our own.

No! As Hebrews says, Jesus "has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself." We live in these end times, "at the end of the age" when God is working out salvation through Jesus Christ, as long as it takes for us to get it right, as long as we want to suffer with things as they are now.

Every time we obsess over our shortcomings, we take Jesus down from the cross and put ourselves up there in his place. Or when we overlook our sinful nature instead of crowding Jesus off the cross, we leave him up there, no need for Jesus to die and rise again, nothing for him to overcome on our behalf we're just fine on our own. That is the power of sin and evil. It takes hold of us and turns us from reliance upon God.

And yet, reliance upon God is our only hope, the only way we can fight that impulse to make it all about us, that desire for more money and more power, that need to strike back and get even, the temptation to feed the body at the expense of the soul.

By acknowledging our sinful nature, our need for Jesus Christ, we are empowered to turn from our misguided, sinful ways and, instead, trust in the Spirit and teachings of Christ, and let that guide and change our lives – and our world – for the better. Amen.

## PASTORAL PRAYER

God of us all, we thank you for this place of worship and this time of prayer. Grant us the joy of praise and affirmation, that it might enliven our families and communities.

Give us a true and faithful sense of confession and forgiveness, that we might be instrumental in healing the divide between personal and national enemies.

Teach us integrity and goodness, that we might be inspired and empowered to curb our greed and help overcome poverty.

Give us the grace of intercession and compassion, to heal the broken, defend the weak, and guide the powerful.

Lord, we pray for those whose health has them feel weakened and broken. We pray for those who have been on our hearts and minds recently, that you would grant them peace of heart, strength of body, and joyful spirits.

Help us, O God, to be focused on the life of your Son, so that by his example, we might be faithful in our walk alongside Jesus and one another.

We ask all this in his powerful name, using the words that he taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,  
as we forgive our debtors;  
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**