

The Greatest Story Ever Told – 2015

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At the Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Not that long ago, the life and death of Jesus was considered the greatest story ever told. But recently a neighbor of ours was surprised to discover that many people don't know it. This neighbor teaches creative writing at a prestigious private college in the New York area. Last week she gave her students an in-class assignment to tell the story of either Passover or Easter. And she said a few of her students had some vague ideas what Easter or Passover were about. But not a single one of them knew either story well enough to tell it. This is the coming generation of Americans. Many of them have little first-hand exposure to religion. What they know comes from advertisements, TV shows and movies. They don't know the stories of faith, even the most important ones. And they don't seem to care.

But here you are today, gathered to hear and walk through part of the most important story of the Christian faith: Jesus' crucifixion and death. Why did you come, especially on a dreary day like this? What difference does this story make? It's certainly not a fun story to hear, one we love to tell over and over. What does it mean to you to be here today?

People can argue over the theological significance of the cross, different theories of atonement, what happens between God and us because of Jesus' death. But that doesn't really get to the heart of the story. Jesus' crucifixion and death are the climax of his life, everything he said and did from his baptism, to the last supper with his disciples. He preached a message of good news, healed the sick and demonstrated God's power here in our midst. He refused to go along with the self-righteous self-interest of the rich and powerful. He told us to love our enemies and be merciful as God is merciful. He taught that whoever wanted to be first must be last of all and servant of all. He never excluded anyone, but chose to eat with sinners and outcasts, because he believed they were God's children too. The religious authorities questioned and criticized him, but he kept preaching and teaching and healing people.

And that is what caused his death. Jesus could have taken back the things he said and did, saying, "I didn't really mean it that way." But he did mean it that way. He could have stayed away from Jerusalem, but he believed God wanted him to make that journey. Jesus lived with integrity. He stood up for truth in the face of lies. He stood up for love and mercy in the face of selfishness and fear. He did not shrink from suffering, but offered his life, and in so doing, revealed the true nature of God, a God of love, who does not impose his will on the earth, or force peace and justice. Instead, God suffers with us, that we might discover a better way.

As we worship and walk today, we carry this story in our hearts, and we keep it alive. This is no fairy tale. It's a story that deals with reality, the reality of sin and evil and injustice in the world, a reality we see every day in the news, and experience in our lives. But that's not the whole of the story, because we know God is there too. Jesus suffered too. He was betrayed and abandoned by his closest friends, and was the victim of injustice. And in the midst of that suffering he shows us the way of good over evil, of truth over lies, of faithfulness over fear.

As we walk today, may we remember all in this world who suffer violence and injustice. And may we pray for the strength to walk in the way of Christ, and carry with us this story of amazing faithfulness and love, for the world to see. In Jesus' name. Amen.