

“No getting around the Cross”  
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Based on the Passion according to John  
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Brothers and sisters, grace to you and peace from God our creator and our savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

As I prepared for Good Friday, as is when I prepare for any worship these days, my daughter Meta is not far away. Right now, I live in a world of an almost 2 year old. And so this year I sat contemplating the cross as she sang herself to sleep in her crib for a nap. And in that quiet afternoon, a song came to mind—not your typical Good Friday fare. It’s about going on a bear hunt. The call and response children’s tune sings: Goin’ on a bear hunt (repeat) I’m not afraid (repeat) Got a real good friend. By my side (repeat). And then in this song you imagine coming to different obstacles: like tall grass; then a lake; and then a tree, and it’s that part of the song that went round and round in my head as I contemplated the cross because the next part of the song goes (you might as well repeat after me): Can’t go over it (repeat) Can’t go under it (repeat) Can’t go around it (repeat) Got to go through it. (repeat)

As followers of Christ, we can’t get around the cross. Many do jump from the “Hosannas” of Palm Sunday to “He is Risen” on the next, from green palms to colorful eggs. This year, I thought I might be able to do that, at least as far as sermon preparation goes, because until too recently, I thought that the cantata for this evening was happening at this service too. But here we are. The cross for all its power, never fails to surprise and confound, captivate and give hope at the same time. I can’t get around the cross and neither could you, or you wouldn’t be here. We are forced to pay attention to it because Christ chose to go through it, for our sake.

There are many things in life that we say, ‘we just have to go through’: moving away from home for the first time, a broken heart, *not* getting the job, a chronic disease or sudden major injury. The death of a loved one. There’s no way even the best non-fiction can prepare you for what those moments are like exactly until you are the one in the thick of it, and it’s your Facebook wall that shares a plea for sympathy or you’re the one asking for prayer. This week, I am aware of those who grieve the loss of their mother, their husband, their teenaged son, and dozens more to tragedies across the world be they the Ebola virus or a capsized ferry. Death is something we may try to deny or ignore but none of us can avoid, ultimately. Indeed, we go through it, many times before our own.

Is that what Jesus knew, on a Friday so long ago, when he made that choice for the cross?

I have wondered again and again *why* it is that he had to die on that day, in that way, on that Golgotha trash heap. He had so many chances to get *over*, *under* or *around* it: He had told his disciples that he was going to be handed over in Jerusalem. Why did he still go there? When he saw Judas coming with the detachment, why didn’t he run into the hills, or pull a disappearing act, like he had shown himself capable of. When he stood before the religious authorities, why didn’t he defend himself? And before Pilate: he had the

moment to clear his name, but he didn't. And from the cross, I hate to admit but the question they derided him with has always been on my mind too: He saved others, let him save himself!

Why didn't you, Jesus? There is so much pain that we can't avoid, but you could've, couldn't you? Every step, he allowed it – the humiliation, torture, isolation. And it was he who ultimately chose to give into it: death.

In all this he seems so utterly, well, God-like and brave, at least by John's account of it. But in the passion according to Matthew we remember that Jesus had struggled so hard with this chosen path that he prayed sweat and blood in the garden. "Not my will but thy will" he had said ultimately. And when they struck him, he no doubt felt pain. For as divinely brave as he walked through all the events of Jerusalem that week, Jesus was a human man ultimately, too: facing the darkness we all stare down and grieve and dread, some days more than others.

Can't go over it, can't go under it, gotta go through it. Death. Is that what Jesus knew, in heading to his cross?

The religious authorities wanted its result but not the responsibility, so they passed on the cross. Pilate didn't understand that kind of truth, so he washed his hands of the cross. The disciples feared it, and so ultimately they fled from the cross.

Only the women were left, grieving and watching from a distance as their brother, son, and savior hung upon it.

'Though he was in the form of God,' Philippians says, 'Christ did not consider equality with God a something to be grasped but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave and submitted himself to death, even death upon a cross.'

There would be no divine intervention of heavenly armies, to save him from crucifixion. There would be no change in plan to allow Jesus to escape Jerusalem and live to a ripe old age.

Jesus set his eyes on the cross and *would not deviate* from that course even to his last breath so that he might say: to the suffering, "there is no place, no pain, no fear, or depth of humiliation of the body that I, that God, has not already visited." So that he could declare to the powers that oppress, your way of power is not my way of power, and your will be undone in the end." So that he could say unto the defeated, who lie in graves marked and unmarked in the cemetery of history: "Death does not have the final say."

He says to us all, in the face of our own mortality: be not afraid. You got a real good friend, by your side, as that children's song says.

Thanks be to God in Christ Jesus, for this cross. Captivating and confounding, horrifying and giving hope. Let us neither flee nor avoid it, but rather fix our eyes upon our savior and Lord who hangs upon this cross, by his choice, body broken, blood shed, for us. Amen.