“Connection, Cry and Curtain”

Mark 15:33-41, John19:28-30

November 6, 2016, David M. Griebner, Riverside UMC

This fall we are looking at six passages in the Bible, three from the Old Testament and three from the New Testament. Together, these six passages capture the heart of the message of the entire Bible. They do so not just because what each one has to tell us individually, but because of the amazing truth they reveal when they are linked together.

For example the first passage we studied was Genesis 3. In Genesis 3 Adam and Eve gave in to temptation. As a result Eden was lost, and sin and death entered the world. Last week, for our first passage from the New Testament we read how Jesus was tempted for 40 days by the devil in the desert. However, in contrast to Adam and Eve, He did not give in to this terrible temptation. Instead He stayed on course to reconcile us to God, and to end the reign of sin and death in the world.

Today we have the second passage from the New Testament, the crucifixion, and the second connection to one of the passages we studied from the Old Testament. I want to look at this passage under three headings. First, the connection. How is this passage connected to one of the passages we studied in the Old Testament? Second, the cry. And third, the curtain. The connection, the cry and the curtain. Let’s go.

**The Connection** – The crucifixion is our second passage from the New Testament and it is connected to the second passage we read from the Old Testament. That would be Genesis 15. In Genesis 15 God made a covenant with Abraham. A covenant is essentially a promise. It is a promise made with the deepest commitment and the most serious consequences we can imagine. To make this covenant God told Abraham to cut several kinds of animals in half and lay them side-by-side to form a path. In this ancient covenant service then each party was to walk between the animals as a sign that they accepted the covenant and would keep the conditions. And most importantly, they would put their life on the line if they didn’t. Both Abraham and God were supposed to walk down the middle between the dead animals to ratify the covenant. But that isn’t what happened. Abraham fell into a deep sleep. He did not walk. Instead a “smoking firepot” and a “blazing torch,” two symbols for God passed between the dead animals. So what does this mean? It means that God was taking responsibility for His side of the covenant *and ours.* God said, ‘If I break the covenant, I will accept the consequences, even up to death, and if you, Abraham or your children, break the covenant, I will also accept the consequences, *even up to death.’*

Now think about our New Testament passage. Do you see it? The crucifixion is many things, but at its heart it *is God keeping His promise*. He made the covenant. He agreed to the consequences – for both of us. And He did it. He didn’t break the covenant; we did. And when we broke the covenant He died. Just as He promised.

So when you read a passage like John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son” understand that this was not “Plan B.” This was not God saying, ‘Now what?’ This wasn’t God trying something new after His covenant with Israel didn’t pan out like He planned. This is God keeping the promise He made to Abraham, and to Israel, and to the world, and to us. This is even more apparent when we turn to the next subject.

**The Cry –** Mark notes that Jesus cried out twice from the cross. The first time He quoted the beginning of Psalm 22 from the Old Testament. The second time he cried out, gave up His spirit, and died. Let’s look at each cry.

The first cry of Jesus comes from Psalm 22. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Why Psalm 22? Certainly these first few words make sense in light of the agony Jesus is experiencing, but that’s not all. Did Jesus cry out this way, not just because of His physical suffering, but because for the first time in His life, and indeed for the first time in eternity, He was experiencing separation from God? He was experiencing for all of us what sin does to us, in order to rescue us from it, in order to save us from it.

There is also this. Long before the Romans invented crucifixion as a means of death, Psalm 22 impossibly describes it almost to a T. “They pierce my hands and my feet. All my bones are on display; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.” Again, Jesus seems to be connecting what He is enduring to something that this Psalm in the Old Testament anticipated centuries before.

There is also a second cry. Mark does not tell us what Jesus said at this moment. He only says He cried out and gave up His spirit. Fortunately we have the other three Gospels and in the Gospel of John, at precisely the same moment, just before Jesus gives up His spirit, John records that He said this: “It is finished.” What does this mean? Here are just a few that come to mind. ***It is finished.*** God has kept the promise He made to Abraham when He walked for both. ***It is finished.*** Jesus did not give in to temptation. ***It is finished.*** He has taken all our sins upon Himself and when we trust in Him, when we put your faith in Him, He gets all our sin and we get all His righteousness, He gets all our guilt and shame and we get all His innocence and joy. ***It is finished.*** We’ve have been rescued. We’ve been saved. ***It is finished.*** Oh my.

**The Curtain –** What is Mark talking about when he says, “The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom?” In the heart of the Temple in Jerusalem there was a curtain. Behind this curtain was the holy of holies where the Ark of the Covenant was placed in the time of Solomon. The Ark was gone by the time of Jesus, but the curtain was still there and the place behind it was still the holiest place in the Temple. Only the High Priest went behind the curtain into the Holy of Holies, and then only once a year on the Day of Atonement. So what does it mean that the curtain was torn in two, and not from bottom to top, but from top to bottom?

Here’s one way to look at it. The Temple was God’s dwelling place on earth. It was the place where you were as close to God as you could get, but it was also a place of impediments. If you were a Gentile, a foreigner and not a Jew, you could only go in so far. If you were a woman you could go in a little further, but then you had to stop. If you were a man you could go further in, but, again, only the High Priest could go into the very presence of God and then only once a year.

So what does it mean that the veil was torn in two? The Bible declares that now, through the blood of Jesus, we all have access to the very heart of God. No more sacrifices are needed, just faith in Him. Hebrews 10:19 captures this truth beautifully. “We have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body…” Now Jesus is the curtain. And we get to go in, all of us, by faith. Everyone who puts his or her faith in Jesus can draw near to God without fear. We’ve been rescued. We’ve been saved. It is finished. God kept the promise He made to Abraham. Do you see it?

Yesterday I read an article online about a renaissance of Christianity and faith going on in Great Britain. There are a number of megachurches in and around London that are bursting at the seams. At one church 45,000 people showed up for an all night event called “The Festiival of Life.” The Church of England is building new churches in London for the first time since the 1950’s. Why? Why is this happening? A new study of these churches has concluded that they have one key thing in common. They understand we all have a desperate need for God and they have placed this need for an authentic relationship with God ***“above all other concerns.”***

This is the story we have been telling in these six scriptures. We have a God who has made our deepest need His highest priority. He has kept His promise, the covenant He made with Abraham. He has come for us personally. On the cross Jesus He took away our sin so that He could give all who trust in Him His very own righteousness. He opened up the most holy place to us all. We needed to be rescued. We needed to be saved. And He has done it. It is finished. Let’s pray…