

The Purpose Driven Life

The 1st Sunday after Christmas Day – Color: White – December 26, 2004

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage

Matthew 27:45-56 (NRSV)

⁴⁵From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ⁴⁶And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" ⁴⁷When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah." ⁴⁸At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. ⁴⁹But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." ⁵⁰Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. ⁵¹At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. ⁵²The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. ⁵³After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. ⁵⁴Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

⁵⁵Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. ⁵⁶Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

Admit it. You didn't expect to come to worship today and hear the story of Jesus' crucifixion and death. Christmas is the season of Glad Tidings and Good News, of peace and joy. Where is the peace and joy in this? Where are the angels? Where is the Good?

I wonder when Mary began to realize where her son's life might take him. Perhaps she recognized the confrontation implicit in the announcement of Jesus' birth, but I doubt it.¹ Mary was a poor, illiterate girl from a tiny village who probably gave little thought either to Rome or to the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem. I imagine that as the years went by, the vividness of Mary's memories began to dim. Jesus grew into a man and took up a trade. Joseph died, leaving Mary to be cared for by her oldest son.² But when Jesus began his public ministry, I imagine that Mary knew quite well where Jesus was headed, at least when she was honest with herself.

I wonder when Jesus began to understand where his life and ministry would lead. Though Mary may have told him stories, he would have had no personal memories of angels and wise men to fall back on.³ I'm sure that Jesus felt a powerful calling from God, but what shape would it take? What was to be his purpose in life, his aims, his vocation?

"I Wonder As I Wander"

There is an old and very haunting song from Appalachia that brings together the seasons of Christmas and Easter. How is it that Jesus "came to die?" Could this not have been avoided? Couldn't Jesus have anything he wanted? Why this?

*I wonder as I wander, out under the sky
How Jesus the savior, did come for to die.
To save lowly people like you and like I,
I wonder as I wander, out under the sky.*

*Sweet Mary laid Jesus, within a cow's stall,
Came wise men and farmers and
shepherds and all.*

*The blessings of Christmas heaven did fall
And God's promise of ages, to them did
recall.*

*If Jesus had wanted for any small thing,
A cloud in the sky or a bird on the wing
Or all of God's angels in heaven to sing.
He surely could have had it, because
He was King.*

¹The Christmas Eve study looked at this confrontation between *Pax Romana* and *Pax Christi*.

²Because Joseph is never mentioned in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' adult life, most scholars assume that Mary was a widow when Jesus began his public ministry at the age of thirty or so. As the oldest son, Jesus would have been responsible for his mother's care. At his crucifixion, Jesus asked his disciple, John, to care for Mary. Mary would have been in her mid-forties at the time of Jesus' death.

³Because Jesus is God incarnate, we can get a little off track here, imagining that Jesus of Nazareth walked around knowing what God knows. But Paul reminds us that Jesus "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness" (Phil. 2:7). Like us, Jesus would not have had memories of his birth.

Why am I here? What does my life mean? What purpose do I serve? Most of us have struggled with questions like this at one time and another. Surely this explains at least some of the popularity of Rick Warren's book, *The Purpose Driven Life*. But how often do we consider Jesus' purpose? We often talk about Jesus having come to save us or to die for our sins, but many Christians seem to think that everything that Jesus said and did *before* the cross was, well, interesting and helpful but just filler until we get to the important stuff. Yet Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection are bound up together. From the beginning of his ministry, Jesus was driven by a purpose, by a mission – a mission that would lead to him to the cross and the death so dramatically depicted by Matthew.

What were Jesus' aims?

Though some of us, at times, have drifted aimlessly through life, I doubt Jesus ever did. At twelve, Jesus told his mother that he “must be about his Father's interests” (Luke 2:49). When we pick up Jesus' story nearly two decades later, he announces that Israel's long wait is over, the coming of

Tombs opened and the dead raised?

Matthew writes that after Jesus died on Friday there was an earthquake, tombs split open, and faithful Israelite dead were raised. Then, on Sunday, after Jesus' resurrection, the raised saints rose from their tombs and entered Jerusalem, where they were seen by many. What do we make of such an odd story? There is no mention of it elsewhere in the NT nor in any other ancient writings.

Most likely, such an event never actually happened, at least not in this way. If you read the verses carefully, you'll see that the chronology is pretty confusing. The tombs split open on Friday but the saints don't actually come out of the tombs until Sunday. Matthew knows of the Friday quake, but he also knows Jesus must be the first to be resurrected. It is as if Matthew tries to have it both ways. So, what gives? God can do anything, so it could have happened, but I think the most plausible explanation is that there was an earthquake and that tombs were opened.¹ The opened tombs would have suggested the long-awaited resurrection of the dead, especially in light of Jesus' resurrection. And so Matthew gives us theology in a narrative form.

Matthew is trying to help us understand the cosmic significance of Jesus' crucifixion death by using three signs. Matthews writes “*Look!*, the tearing of the temple curtain . . . *And*, the raising of Israel's faithful . . . *And*, the confession of the Roman soldiers.” Don't we (the reader) grasp the world-changing power of what just happened on the cross??!! Don't we grasp that Jesus' death and resurrection mark the beginning of the end-times??!!

1. Jewish tombs at this time were not graves as we think of them. They were usually chambers in caves or other formations that could be entered and left. The openings were often covered with a round stone “door” that could be rolled away. It was not unusual for tombs to open when there were significant tremors.

God's kingdom is at hand (Mark 1:15). Knowing that Israel is on a horribly wrong path, Jesus sets about the creation of a renewed Israel, gathering around himself twelve disciples. By gathering them around himself as God gathered around himself twelve tribes, Jesus hints that there is more at work than teaching God's people a new way forward.

We see a person's aims in their actions. Jesus heals the lame and blind because in God's kingdom there are none. Jesus says “follow me” when any respectable Jew would have said “follow God.” Jesus forgives sin, even though only God can forgive sin. Jesus forgives these sins any place, though the sins of Israel are to be forgiven only in the temple. Jesus rides into Jerusalem as some sort of returning king and heads immediately for the temple where, like Jeremiah 600 years before, he pronounces judgment upon the temple.

In all this and much more, we see Jesus' aims, his purpose. He will do and be for Israel, and by extension for the whole world, what Israel been unable to do and to be for herself. But there is more, he will do and be and what only God can do and be! This is the mission that Jesus will not give up even when tempted. Did he know that this would lead to his death? Of course. He'd have been a fool not to know. Did he want to die? Or course not. Who does. At Gethsemane, Jesus prayed that there might be another way. But he also cherished Isaiah 53 and its depiction of a suffering servant upon whom the iniquity of us all would be laid (53:6), yet through whom the will of the Lord would prosper (53:10). From the manger to the cross, Jesus pressed forward with the purposes given him by his Father despite the very real consequences to himself – this is love. To whom do we turn to understand our own purpose, to find our own works of love in God's kingdom?

Daily Bible Readings

(These are speeches from Acts about Jesus, who is seen as Savior and the fulfillment of Israel's story.)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Acts 2:14-36 Peter's first speech, at Pentecost.</p>	<p>Day 2 Acts 3:11-26 Peter's second speech to the Jews at the temple.</p>
<p>Day 3 Acts 7:1-53 Stephen's speech to the Jewish Council. He is stoned afterwards.</p>	<p>Day 4 Acts 13:16-47 Paul's first extended speech.</p>
<p>Day 5 Acts 17 Paul's speech to the philosophers of Athens.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Beginning January 9 – A New Five-Week Teaching Series at 9:30 with Scott Engle in Wesley Hall

Biblical Perspectives on Love, Marriage, and Sex

In this series, we'll look at the Christian understanding of love, marriage and discipleship, habits of a healthy marriage, God's plan for our sexual intimacy, and turning to Christ and each other when we hit the rough times in our marriages.

**Winter Bible Academy also begins the week of January 9.
Information on classes and registration is now available online at
www.standrewccl.org**

Classes include: *The Balanced Life* (Sunday afternoon); *The Gospel of Luke: Jesus – Savior of the World* (Monday morning & Tuesday evening); *Why me, Lord? – The Book of Job: A study of faith and hope* (Wednesday lunch); *The Letter to the Hebrews: The final sacrifice* (Thursday morning); *The Gospel of John* (Thursday lunch); *Meeting Jesus: His life and times* (Monday evening); and *Beginnings* (Monday evening)

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. When we speak of Jesus' "purpose driven life" we are speaking of his intentions, his aims. Have you ever thought about Jesus in this way? What is to be gained by trying to discern Jesus' aims? How would we go about trying to understand anyone's aims, even our own? We can't peer into someone's mind but we can observe what they do and what they say and, perhaps, draw some conclusions about their aims, what it is that they seem to want to accomplish. What conclusions do you come to about Jesus' intentions when you look at what he did and said?
2. Do you have aims, purposes, for your own life? What are they? What aims might God have for you? How do you think that your family and friends would describe your aims in life – as they see them? Many Christians turn to the Great Commission to look for purpose. That is certainly where Rick Warren heads in *The Purpose Driven Life*. The making of disciples is central our lives as Christians and it is the stated mission of the UMC. But what do you think that really means? Is it sufficient to describe the purposes of your own life? How might it change our aims in life if we understand that the making of disciples entails doing all we can to build God's kingdom in this life, in this world?