

Solid Ground: The Way of the Cross
1 Corinthians 1:18-25; September 14, 2014
Pastor Judy Bangsund

Today is Sept 14, just 3 days after the anniversary of 9/11. They say that everyone who is old enough can remember exactly where they were the moment they heard the news. I remember it very well. It was a Tuesday and in E. Africa it was late afternoon (7 time zones ahead of New York). I had just returned home from town. Jim greeted me at the door with the news, “America is under attack.” My first thought, “There must be a mistake. It’s just an accident – right? -- and someone has *called* it an attack.” And then he said, “Not once but twice.” And my heart sank. More incidents followed. It was true. But... who would attack America? How could it possibly happen?

If you thought the way I did 13 years ago, then the possibility of attack seemed ridiculous. America has the strongest military in the world. And Americans are the good guys, right? We *help* countries in crisis – with food or Red Cross or even armies. Who would do such a thing... to us?

Well, today those questions sound naive. Clearly the world picture is far more complex than it looked back then. The assumptions I made 13 years ago were clearly false; America was attacked in spite of all I trusted. I was on shaky ground in my thinking.

So the question is: where *do* you place your trust? What is *not* shaky ground? Which assumptions are false, and which are true? That’s the question behind a theology of the cross. Today is Holy Cross Sunday; we *lift high the cross*. But any reflective person would ask: Why on earth would someone revere a cross (that first century version of a noose or firing squad)? Crosses are bad news, right? As Christians, we need to check our assumptions so that we can get some answers. What would you say to someone who asks, what’s so *good* about the cross?

Luther, following St Paul, first described what is called a “theology of the cross.” Now, theology sounds like a big word; it’s not. *Theos* means God; *logos* means word. We are all theologians in that we are all God-talkers. Luther said the question is, “What kind of God-talker are you?” C. S. Lewis said that theology is like a map; it helps you navigate. Some people say, “I don’t need theology; I don’t need a map. I can know God simply through nature, gazing at the sea.” That’s fine, up to a point. But if you ever want to sail those seas, you need a navigation tool. That’s what theology is; it helps you navigate your faith, challenging your assumptions. Luther helps us by comparing two theologies – what people generally think and what the Bible actually says. The first he called the Glory Road. The second is the Way of the Cross.

The Glory Road is what seems to make the most sense. Even in the Church, a lot of Christians take the Glory Road. It is the easiest to explain; it’s what we see around us. Basically, it means that what you do in life will determine its outcome. (Sounds reasonable.) It’s based on *what you must do*. But when applied to your relationship with God, it doesn’t work; it’s all upside down. The Glory Road makes you climb a ladder *up* to God. The Way of the Cross shows you that God comes *down* to you.

One of the problems with the Glory Road is that it requires you to minimize Scripture, to re-write it. The biblical message gets watered down, simplified, until it's a muddy mess of sentimentality. For example, the Bible speaks of the wrath of God. This is awkward. It makes it hard for us to talk about a loving God. Some people have even distinguished between the "angry God of the Old Testament" vs the "loving Christ of the New." My friends, that's heresy. There is only one God. The angry God is the same as the loving God. When you start to explain away the difficult parts of the Bible you usually land in one heresy or another.

Take a look at the Old Testament lesson for today. It's awkward, isn't it? Because here we find the Israelites complaining in the wilderness. Lousy food, not enough water. They cry, "It was better in Egypt, even under slavery." But their complaint is not only against Moses but also against God. They are putting themselves on the Glory Road which means they are about to take matters into their own hands. ("God, you aren't doing this right! Move over...") Who gets the glory here? (We do.) So God sends venomous snakes which bite and kill some of them. He doesn't take away the snakes but offers a cure: any one who looks at the bronze snake will live. Well, why the extra step? We don't get it.

Many people wish the Bible wouldn't say things like that. We wish God could come off a little nicer, more benevolent. We wish he would simply take the trouble away – or take us out of the trouble. (Isn't that what we want?) But God doesn't always work that way. In this case, he turns trouble into an opportunity for growing faith – because their problem was a *lack of faith*. In so doing, he foreshadows a much greater work of mercy, with the lifting up of the bronze serpent later fulfilled through the lifting up of Jesus on the cross.

The Glory Road will often begin by simplifying and sentimentalizing Scripture. Underneath that effort is the assumption that we're smarter than God. (Wasn't that the original sin? Adam and Eve wanting to be like God, taking matters into their own hands?) But Paul says clearly – the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men. And down deep, that's really what we want: a God who is smarter than we are. When we start messing with his Word, we're bound to land in quicksand. The only solid ground is God's revelation of himself to us – and that comes through Scripture -- all of it.

Secondly, if you walk the Glory Road you will assume that *if* you do everything right you will live a good life. That's the American dream: work hard and you will succeed. Study hard and you will get your degree. Invest well and you will have enough for your old age. Common sense, right? And generally, it's good advice. But note that this is a *transaction kind of mentality*: if I do this, I get that. If I put in all the right numbers, I get the desired result. It works in this world – mostly. (You obey the laws; nobody gets hurt.) But it's not good theology. Being a good citizen will not protect you from tough times. That's Glory Road thinking: a glorified life; an idealized life.

And it's what a lot of people think, including a lot of Christians. Somehow the Gospel has gotten twisted into Law: be good and God will bless you. There we are; back to *what we must do*. It's been said before but I'll say it again: The Gospel is always *what God has done*, not what you must do. (Remember Pastor Jim's ducks from two weeks ago? The first and larger duck is *what God has done for you*.) *That's* good news. *That's* Gospel. It's about gift; not transaction.

But how often have you heard someone say, “I don’t deserve this! Why did this happen to me?” There’s no good answer. A non-smoker gets cancer and dies young. A child of good Christian parents gets hit by a bus on the way to Sunday school. The hardest worker in the office gets the sack. It’s hard. It’s tough! It’s natural to wonder, “Why did God allow this to happen?”

My friends, that’s Glory Road thinking. You’ve got a lousy map. You’ll never get a good answer because your theology is based on shaky ground. At bottom is the idea that “I’m a good person so I should have a good life.” But you and I both know, in our heads at least, that this doesn’t always work. The lessons of history teach us that. No wonder people lose faith if this is what they think! But God says, “My thoughts are not your thoughts; neither are my ways your ways.” And finally, we want a God who knows better than we do. We need to humbly respect the fact that God is God and we are not.

The Glory Road deceives; it will not get you where you want to go. But the Way of the Cross is true; it calls a thing what it is. It does not simplify or sentimentalize; it does not promise what it cannot deliver. And because it’s solid ground, it delivers real hope. Against all human wisdom, God is found – not always in good times – but often during hard times. And ironically, that’s also where hope replaces despair.

So what is this Way of the Cross? Luther says it calls a thing what it is. Sin is bad. Confession is good. Scripture is true. And it says that God is often found in unlikely places. God’s Son was born in a manger and died on a cross. Luther says, God is found in the “sign of the opposite.” Remember that the first century cross indicated a shameful death. The *last* place you would look for the Prince of Glory was in a place of shame. The cross is a sign of the opposite: glory is found in shame; weakness becomes strength; life results from death. That’s where you find God.

You will not find God in what the world considers wise. All the fine-sounding philosophies of the world will not direct you to the cross. The world says, “Climb *up* the ladder of success.” But you cannot climb a ladder of hard work or good deeds and find God. You can’t climb a ladder up to God because it’s just too hard; instead, *God comes down to you*. It’s not intuitive – other religions require an uphill climb. But in Christ, God comes down to you. *That’s* the Way of the Cross.

It’s the Way of the Cross because it’s the way of love. Luther says that the cross stands between two pillars held in tension: God’s Law and God’s Love. God’s law is good; it reveals his will and it functions to keep order in our society. But the law demands what it cannot deliver. The Bible says, “You must be perfect, even as God is perfect.” You can’t do it. The Law cannot make you perfect. So the Law, although good, accuses you: it says, “Not good enough!” It acts like a mirror that shows all your imperfections.

But Love perfectly and completely fulfills the Law – through the Cross. Love acts before the Law ever utters a word. God perfectly loved the world, putting an end to sin and silencing the accusing voice of the law. In love he stretched his arms wide on a cross as a helpless criminal. His strength is found in the place of weakness. It was on the cross that Jesus perfected in love what the Law demands. The power of sin is broken. The accusing voice of the Law is stilled.

My friends, we need to open up our eyes to see things as they really are. Our situation is pretty dire. Sin has us in an iron grip. As any addict will tell you, you cannot stay away from sin's temptations under your own steam. You need what AA calls a higher Power, what we know to be God in Christ. Only God can free you from the power of sin. Even Paul talks like a recovering addict: "Wretched man that I am! For I cannot do what I know I should; and I end up doing what I know I shouldn't. Who will rescue me from this body of death?" We are powerless on our own. Sin, like cancer, has permeated our lives. We are so riddled with malignancy that a cure would kill us. Chemo is a toxin. It's poison. A good oncologist needs to apply enough chemo to kill the cancer but not the patient. But my friends, we are already at Stage 4. No amount of chemo can cure the cancer of sin without also killing the patient. The only cure is death. That's the Way of the Cross. It kills so that it can make alive.

Like I said, it's a dire situation. So where is the hope? You'll find it on the cross. Jesus took the cure upon himself. The cure was so radical it killed the patient. It was the only way. On the cross Jesus finally and completely conquered the enemies of both sin and death. Because death could not hold him – the Lord of Life. Jesus is resurrected from the grave and that means that something entirely new has begun. Sin has lost its iron grip; death has lost its sting; eternal life is born. *That's* the hope of the Gospel. Already we can see its effects. Already we are allowed to participate in Jesus' resurrection life, even here and now in this world. That's the Way of the Cross. That's the power of God!

I began with 9/11; let me close with one more 9/11 story. After the first responders went in, others followed. Among them was the Salvation Army, which set up booths for washing eyes burned by smoke, providing cream for parched lips and foot inserts for boots walking across hot metal. They gave out phone cards, food, water -- and prayed for anyone who asked. In response to requests from police and firemen, they conducted prayer services on the site twice a day. Throughout the country, people flocked into churches. Prayer vigils sprouted up everywhere. Americans began to realize that all our own structures and systems – everything on which we trust – is not, finally, reliable. Our greatest strengths can crumble at a moment's notice. God alone is reliable; he alone has the power to bring new life and to sustain us through tough times. When everything else fails, the power of God stands strong.

Dear friends, don't stake your life on shaky ground. The Glory Road – which minimizes Scripture and fools you into believing that you can make it on your own, that you deserve a good life – finally leads you nowhere. It's a lousy map. Instead, look up to the Cross and live – because a true map is all about *what God has done for you*. God's absolute gifts to you are forgiveness, freedom, life and peace. So put your trust in Christ and what he has done for you on the cross. And when you do, God's new creation will begin to well up in you – for it is in dying that you find life. On a cross. In Christ. And nowhere else. Amen.