

“Branding”

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We declare today that the cross will forever be our brand.

Mark 15:33-39

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(Corinth sermons are available in audio and print forms at corinthtoday.org/sermons.)

The main thing – Paul

What is it you miss most about the normalcy we had a month ago? We miss a lot of things—sitting at your favorite restaurant, visiting with friends, being in close proximity with people. It’s weird, and we went through March without being able to watch March Madness which brings us to sports in general.

For many people, football means tailgating. We didn’t tailgate back in the day. My roommate and I would flip a coin to see if we were going fishing or to the game that day. Now everyone is tailgating. People are showing up at 8 a.m., setting up, and grilling for a 1 p.m. game. It is so boring that they have had to come up with things to do while they are out there—like corn hole and ladder golf. It’s elaborate and huge. There are people that tailgate and don’t even go to the game anymore.

The whole point of tailgating was to get you ready for the game. Now it’s become its own thing. The game is now secondary. The game has become what it’s not about. Tailgating has become the main focus when the game should be.

The cross is the main thing. The symbol for Christianity is not a flying dove or a flame of fire or an empty tomb. It is the cross. It is the main focus. We can’t let the “Christian things” be in place of the cross of Jesus Christ.

Some people are all about the fellowship at church. Some are all about the music, the building, the tradition, or liturgy. These things only have context because of the cross. Even the ministries that we do (compassion, evangelism, missions, loving

people, etc.) only have context because of the cross of Jesus Christ. To put it simply, “You’ve got to remember to keep the main thing, the main thing.”

Mark 15:33-36 – Paul

Verses 33-39, are a familiar story to you, as familiar as Neil Armstrong stepping on to the moon. We know it. In this text, the Son of God is killed. You’ve heard it many times before but hear it again anew because it is the main thing.

Verse 33 talks about the darkness falling on the land for 3 hours. It wasn’t an eclipse; it was a miraculous darkness. It was the wrong time of year for an eclipse. The Passover had everything to do with the lunar calendar so it is impossible.

It is also a bit of foreshadowing. In the plagues in Egypt, the last plague before the death of the first born and before the death of the Passover Lamb, the Lamb of God, was the three-day period of darkness. (Exodus 10:22)

Now further darkness is coming. The very light of the world, the very morning star—his light is going to go dark as well. In him all things were created. (John 1:3) He spoke, and they were created. The word became flesh and lived among us. Creation itself is mourning at this moment. Judgment is coming.

In verse 34, there is a mysterious phrase. It is prophetic—Jesus is quoting from Psalm 22. He knew it was coming. Jesus knew this would be his last breath. He knew everything. He knew when he went into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey that this would be the last week of his life.

You have heard that the Romans murdered Jesus, that the Jews murdered Jesus, or that Jesus was a martyr. None of this is true. Jesus willingly lays down his life. Jesus could have called the armies of angels down. He was absolutely in control.

He willingly laid his life down for us. (Isaiah 53:12) Why does he say then “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” if he knows it’s coming? Because Jesus was well acquainted with the effects of sin. He created people. He walked with them. He is there and watches Adam and Eve sin at the very beginning.

This is the first time that Jesus has ever been fully acquainted with the consequences of sin. Not his sin but our sin. The consequences of sin are to be cut off from the Father. And notice that Jesus is broken by being cut off from the Father.

Now when all the sin of the world is put on him and the world goes dark, it breaks him. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” He who was eternally joined to the Father is now, for the first time ever, not joined to the Father. All of the sin was put onto him because he is the Passover Lamb.

Verses 35-36 show the hardened condition of the human heart. What Mel Gibson got right in the Passion of the Christ is that it was not a sanitary, clean execution. It was a blood fest. It is uncomfortable to talk about the blood of Jesus. The people that were around the cross were close enough to have blood splattered on them. This was not someone watching from far away. We are talking about someone at the foot of the

cross that did not have a reaction of awe or pity. Their only reaction is to get Jesus something to drink so that they can see if he says anything else and Elijah comes down.

Sometimes we say, “If I could only see Jesus in person, my life would be changed.” Here we have someone who is watching the Son of God be crucified for their sins, and it is merely entertainment. That’s how hard human hearts are.

Mark 15:37-39 – Bob

Verse 37 combines the most significant noise the world has ever heard, followed by the most dramatic hush: “With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.”

What were the loud words? Luke records, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” John says Jesus’ last words were, “It is finished!” I’m sure Jesus said both, but if these were the words of completion, never has anything more significant been said.

Mark doesn’t give the quote, so he wants us to notice something else. No one naturally dies with a shout. We either die unconsciously or with a whisper and one last breath. This yell reveals a lot of life left in Jesus. They didn’t kill him; he gave up his life.

In verse 38, Mark joins Matthew and Luke in reporting that “The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom,” but he doesn’t tell us why.¹ Mark’s hint is that it “was torn from top to bottom.” The passive voice plus the direction of the tear clearly implies that this is God’s doing. But why? Fortunately the writer of Hebrews answers that question. What happened that day gave us “confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain” (Hebrews 10:19-20).

In verse 39, Mark ends his telling of the death of Jesus with a remarkable confession from an unexpected source. The Roman centurion supervising the crucifixion, standing right in front of Jesus, said, “Surely this man was the Son of God!” Mark says the reason he said this is because he “saw how he died.” I think Mark is referring to the strength of that loud cry and voluntary yielding of his spirit.

Did the Roman soldier know what he was saying? We can’t know for sure, but it’s not the point. Mark knows what he was saying, and Mark’s readers know what he’s saying. Mark had opened his gospel, “The beginning of the good news about Jesus the

¹ We don’t even know for sure which curtain, because there were two of them. If it was the outer curtain, many people in the temple area would have witnessed it. If it was the inner curtain separating the holy place from the holy of holies, only a few priests would have seen it and could easily have concealed the event. No other ancient source records this exact event, but both Jewish and Roman sources record strange and inexplicable events forty years before the temple was destroyed. According to Alfred Edersheim, Josephus (Jewish Wars, vi. 5,3) says the middle and primary light in the Golden Candlestick went out. Joseph and the Talmud (Jer. Yoma 43c; Yoma 39b.) record a supernatural opening in the temple gates. Writing a couple of centuries later, St. Jerome says the lintel of the temple splintered that day (connecting it to the earthquake recorded in Matthew 27:51), which would have split the veil in two from top to bottom. What matters most is that this event was a God-thing.

Messiah, the Son of God" (1:1). The Father had said at Jesus' baptism and transfiguration: "You are my Son, whom I love" (1:11). On two occasions in Mark demons had professed Jesus as the Son of God (3:11; 5:7), only to be told by Jesus to keep quiet. At his trial earlier that morning, the high priest had asked Jesus, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" Jesus answered, "I am" (Mark 14:61).

Mark's readers in Rome would have been particularly impressed by the addition of a voice of one of their own – a Roman centurion – confessing who Jesus truly is.

Branding

If you've noticed on your bulletin or on our live feed the title I gave to this sermon, you might be a little puzzled. What does this have to do with "branding"?

Jeffrey White called me Thursday afternoon. He said, "Bob, I've been thinking about the title you give to your daily email: 'The Coronian.' Think about it from a branding perspective. You're connecting our church name to the pandemic. When all this is over do you want people to connect us to global fear, death, and recession?"

Of course, any church named "Corinth" already has a branding problem. Among the ancient cities related to the Bible, our founders could have done a lot better than a city with a reputation something like Las Vegas. "Come join us to worship the Lord at Sin City this week!" To call a girl a "Corinthian" in the first century was to call her a prostitute. We decided to redeem the name, to acknowledge that we're all Corinthians.

The Church of Jesus Christ has an even more serious branding problem. Our logo is a cross, which has a far more heinous association than the Coronavirus. Early Christians chose a fish as their symbol. As time passed, they could have changed it to a manger or a servant's towel or a stone, like the one that was rolled away. Instead, they went with a cross. We should think of it in the same way as we do the coronavirus.

In 1985, John R. W. Stott wrote what must be the most comprehensive overview of the meaning of Jesus' death titled *The Cross of Christ*. I quoted one line from that book at the top of your bulletin: "The essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man." If you're a reader, order it on [Amazon](#) or Kindle this week. Or [click here](#) for a 30-minute sermon book summary by Pastor Greg VanCourt at Dayspring Fellowship in Austin, TX.

Stott notes that early Christians took a lot of ridicule for their association with the cross. The earliest surviving graffiti of Jesus' crucifixion is a caricature of a man stretched on a cross with a donkey's head. To his left is another man worshipping him, with a caption: "Alexamenos worships God." The message is clear: "If you worship someone who's been crucified, you worship an ass. Good luck with that." To both Jews and Romans, crucifixion represented the most extreme humiliation ever imposed on a man. For Romans, shame among men. For Jews, a curse from God.

We declare today that the cross will forever be our brand. As the gospel hymn says, "To the old rugged cross I will ever be true, its shame and reproach gladly bear." We'll close this service singing, "Lift high the cross!"

The New Testament letters say far more about Jesus' death than they do about his incarnation or resurrection, even though both are critical. You cannot and must not ever tell the story of Jesus without the cross. So why does Jesus' death on the cross matter? Let me answer that personally.

First, I can never see God the same way. Today we're talking a lot about health professionals and first responders who are placing themselves in harm's way with the coronavirus to create a shield for the rest of us. And well we should. They are our heroes of pandemic self-sacrifice. Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for a friend." But they only illustrate the greater sacrifice of Jesus.

Who's your political hero? For the sake of this illustration, it doesn't matter whether it's Donald Trump or Nancy Pelosi or Joe Biden. Imagine if that person said, "You stay home. It is too risky for you out there. I will personally get your groceries, bring your medicine, whatever you need. I'd rather I get sick or die – not you."

That illustration pales in comparison to the cross, for several reasons. First, they're not God, even if sometimes it seems like they think so. Second, it's only a risk and not a real sacrifice. Third, the sacrifice isn't about paying a debt on your behalf. There's no illustration that can fully explain the cross. Don't ever diminish Jesus as simply a great moral example because he suffered. Don't pity him on the cross either.

When he "breathed his last" the very Creator of the universe accepted in his body and soul the full penalty for my sin and yours, and if he hadn't done so we'd all have to suffer God's wrath forever. Anyone who diminishes the cross does so out of blindness, boasting, "I'm not really bad enough to need the cross." If you've never seen Jesus hanging there and responded in faith, "You are the Son of God, abandoned by God for me," today is a great time to say, "Jesus, my sin put you there. I place my trust in you alone. Take charge of my life."

The New Testament emphasis is not, however, on perpetual guilt if you are a believer. You are to declare with Paul in Romans 8, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. I am free. And nothing can separate me from his love." I never have to go to bed at night or wake up in the morning asking, "Is God disappointed in me? Is he mad at me? Am I worthy of him?" Because of the cross, God doesn't see me through the lens of my selfishness, pride, greed, lust, anger, resentment, or any other sin. When he sees me, he sees the character of Jesus.

Second, I can never see people the same way. Ever since the moment Jesus breathed his last, there are two categories of people – those who embrace the cross and

those who don't. I can't always tell the difference, and that's OK. I don't need to. Jesus will come to judge the living and the dead.

In the meantime, if someone says they embrace the cross, I'll give them the benefit of the doubt. If their life or behavior doesn't show it, I will try to give them the grace I hope they'll give me. As a pastor or friend, sometimes I'll need to confront, but I won't make it my central focus.

I'm sometimes asked, "How can you love people who hate you, especially if they claim to be believers?" Or, "How can you accept so-and-so as a leader or church member?" Or, "How do you stay in relationship with those liberals (fundamentalists)?" My answer, whether or not I paraphrase it, is simple: "The cross."

A mentor once said to me, "Why would I separate myself from someone God has accepted?" And how does God accept us? Thank God, not because we have our life or doctrine squared away, but precisely because even though we don't, Jesus "breathed his last" for us. It all goes back to that day when Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "It is finished," and committed his spirit to the Father.

What about those who don't embrace the cross? What do they need from me or from you? They need to see that we're different and why. They need us to be ready to explain why, if asked. But they'll never ask if we don't react differently. In some cases during this pandemic, it seems to me that Christians have acted just like the world – with fear, with hoarding, with greed, with self-protection.

What I've loved seeing and hearing are the stories of those who work harder, give more, love better. It's what the cross does for you. My prayer is that as this thing unfolds, people in our community will brand us as "Coronian Reformed Church." Jeffrey White said later in the week that if we explain our branding, we can remove its negative association and turn it into something positive.

I hope when all this is over we will be known as a church that didn't shut down. I hope they'll say of us, they never missed a beat in worship, they tracked down the lonely, they gave out chicken pies and toilet paper, they gave away tens of thousands of dollars to those who couldn't pay their bills, they strengthened their bonds with churches all across Hickory, they hosted a record-breaking blood drive, they prayed for and supported healthcare workers and first responders, they supported their mission partners even more, they never stopped proclaiming the gospel and teaching the Bible. When it was over, their love for God was stronger, their love for each other was deeper, and their love for the world was even more visible. That's the Coronian Church.

And when we're asked why, we will say, "It's simple. We're people of the cross." If they say we did well, we will answer with the Apostle Paul, "May I never boast in anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." (Galatians 6:14, NLT). Amen.