

Fourth Sunday in Lent
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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I want to talk about the cross. And I will get into the topic with a few cross-centered anecdotes.

Number one: When I was in 8th grade, I went to a leadership training summer camp for young Christians, and it was a profoundly changing experience for me. At the end of the camp, we ended up having a graduation ceremony of sorts, and all the newly minted leaders received a cross. And I thought it was the most important thing in the world. I wore it my entire freshman year of high school, which in hindsight was a little gutsy as it wasn't a terribly cool thing to do.

Number two: about five years ago, there was a funeral here of someone who was only somewhat connected to the parish—I didn't know the family, but I think the deceased had maybe attended her in childhood. Seemingly, the family was a well-heeled one because I noticed lots of expensive haircuts and really nice suits in the congregation. During communion, as I was leaning down to give the wafers to all the mourners, I couldn't help but notice that many of the society ladies had jeweled cross necklaces. And we're talking really nice ones—diamonds and rubies and emeralds—all on gold and all in the shape of the cross. A Roman torture device on which God died two thousand years ago.

Number 3: I try not to use my husband in sermons, but he's not here this morning, so he'll never know. Travis grew up in an Evangelical household, and that branch of Christianity doesn't have a lot of time for the ritual actions that higher churches—Catholics, Lutherans, Episcopalians—have. One of the marks of a church service in a higher church is the use of a procession—the altar party, choir, and clergy all enter, following a processional cross. And Travis told me that the first time he walked into an Episcopal church and saw someone dressed in white robes and carrying a big silver cross down the aisle, his evangelical upbringing rose inside of him, and he almost walked out of the door, because it looked sort of pagan or, worse, Catholic.

Last cross story: I have a very sweet memory from eight years ago on my very first Good Friday. There is a small instruction in the prayer book in the Good Friday liturgy that says “a wooden cross may now be brought into the church and placed in the sight of the people.” And, I gather that for many years, Vince Katter and Frank West would be the ones who would bring in the cross, so I have a memory of them standing in the side hallway, at attention, ready to bring the cross into the sanctuary so that the people could practice their veneration by kneeling at it, or kissing it, or touching it, or laying their sins at the foot of it. It is a strange but deeply humbling moment in the Christian's year.

So, the cross is everywhere. But sometimes the symbols that are the most familiar are the ones that we forget to stop and deeply consider. We share in a faith that is two millennia old, at the center of which is a symbol of state punishment. And we, Christian people, make it out of brass and silver and jewels and put it in every Christian house of worship on the planet. We wear the cross around our necks, and we even get it tattooed on our arms. But what is it? What is it that we are hoisting up in the center of our community just like the Israelites hoisted the snake?

I think the cross is a shorthand. In one simple symbol, it transfers the entirety of our faith into the mind of anyone who beholds it. The cross tells us that cruelty is real. It teaches the brutal lesson that humans, especially humans in power, can be unimaginably cruel. We can be savage and pitiless. We can oppress the weak, bomb mothers and children to smithereens, arrest the peaceful, and murder the outsider. The cross teaches us that we can encounter Christ and find him to be a threat to our power. The cross teaches that we do not need much encouragement to spit in the eye of God.

But that's not the reason that we place it at the center of our lives. I think that we have a very old spiritual intuition that tells us that the cross' deeper, divine meaning is more than a cautionary tale about the evils that can exist in the minds of our collective humanity. The subversion of the cross is that God has taken the worst of us and, through divine alchemy, transformed it into love. Just as Moses and the ancient Israelites turned the serpent into a symbol of healing, so have Christians taken the carnage of the crucifixion and transformed it into a symbol of peace, of hope, of God's limitless love. And all of that gets communicated with two sticks affixed to one another. No wonder we wear it around our necks.

I think the lesson of Moses and the snake and the lesson of the cross are the same one. When we get together, given enough time, we are going to put something on a stick and put it in the middle of our community. It's going to be a statue of a dead leader, or a plaque about a battle, or a skyscraper as a tribute to commerce, or a government temple. We can't help ourselves. But the wisdom of the cross is that it—jeweled necklaces notwithstanding—resists corruption. The cross is the soul and the center of our faith. It is the embodiment of the lessons of Christianity, and it is the contradictory symbol of love. There's a beautiful phrase that the Carthusian monks use: the cross is steady while the world turns. Nothing truer has been spoken.

It's been my custom to preach mainly about the table as the place of our Christian identity. And I stand by that—breaking bread is a deeply religious act. But I think I would be remiss if I didn't remind us, in this season of Lent, in this season approaching the Passion of Jesus, that the cross is our teacher and our guide. It is our cautionary tale and our daily reminder that there is no condition, however hopeless seeming, that God cannot redeem. It is the proof that we worship a God who has experienced the worst that humanity has to offer and chose love anyway. And it is our inoculation from the teachings of the world that runs counter to the word of God. Power is not in arms. Salvation is not in might. Oppressors will not win. And we are never beyond divine love. That is the message of Lent. That is the message of the cross. The cross is steady while the world turns. Amen.