

## In the Public Domain

### Hebrews 2: 9b-18

9b Yes, by God's grace, Jesus tasted death for everyone. 10 In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what He suffered. 11 Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters.

12 He says, "I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters; in the assembly I will sing your praises." (Psalm 22:22)

13 And again, "I will put my trust in him." And again He says, "Here am I, and the children God has given me." (Isaiah 8:18)

14 Since the children have flesh and blood, He too shared in their humanity so that by His death He might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—15 and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. 16 For surely it is not angels He helps, but Abraham's descendants. 17 For this reason He had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that He might make atonement for the sins of the people. 18 Because He Himself suffered when He was tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted.

Scores of works entered the public domain on January 1 of 2018. Today's text on the first Sunday of the 2023 reminds us that the Cross has never been private, but, rather, has always been in the public domain. Jesus didn't suffer and die for just the Jews, the people who said the right things, lived the right way, or looked a certain way. Jesus died for all of us and each of us. **[NOTE 1]**

It's one of the most popular gospel hymns ever written, appearing in well over 200 hymnals since its first publication in 1912. As anyone who's ever fielded requests at a hymn sing can tell you, it's the particular favorite of older women — likely because it reflects the passionate faith of a biblical woman, Mary Magdalene, as she encounters the risen Jesus for the first time. It is, of course, "I Come to the Garden Alone" — also known as "In the Garden." Unlike many hymns whose words speak broadly of the love of God for all people, this one is relentlessly personal. The first-person pronouns "I" and "me" occur more than a dozen times in its brief text of three stanzas plus refrain. Only twice does the plural pronoun "we" occur, but in both cases it refers to the tight couple of the hymn's narrator and her beloved Lord: "And the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known."

Evangelistic preachers rightfully encourage their listeners to establish a personal relationship with Christ, but the relationship celebrated "In the Garden" borders on the private. "None other has ever known" this special bond, croons this awestruck disciple who comes to the Garden alone and encounters Jesus alone. We Christians all have our testimonies, our origin stories of how we first came to commit our lives to the Lord.

These stories are very personal — so personal that sometimes we feel they belong to us alone.

That's what a certain Princeton Theological Seminary student — let's call him James — felt as he sang in the seminary's Touring Choir in the late 1960s. The usual format for the choir's musical presentations included testimony by two choir members, each of whom shared the story of his or her call to ministry.

After several months of these weekly visits to congregations, the choir members had become thoroughly familiar with each other's call stories. Richard, one of James' friends in the choir, had a penchant for irreverent practical jokes and one day he took advantage of what he'd learned.

On a day when Richard was scheduled to speak first, he arose before the congregation and shared not his own call story, but the one belonging to James, who was scheduled to follow him. It was accurate down to the smallest detail.

James listened with growing horror as Richard stole his thunder. The other choir members, aware of the unfolding prank, struggled to keep straight faces. James had to think fast. What was he going to say without sounding like a craven impostor?

There was nothing he could do but go along. Richard had given him no choice. Standing up before the congregation, James shared Richard's call story as though it were his own. So skillfully did he render the details that the congregation was none the wiser. But the audience had to wonder about the snickers and laughs among the choir members while they listened.

Now it's kind of funny but gets awful close to crossing the line of what is acceptable and what is not. No doubt the choir director had some stern words for the high-spirited students on the bus ride back to campus. But the story illustrates the tension between what is public and what is private about our experiences of Jesus Christ.

In late 2018, there were a number of news stories about an unprecedented event in the world of copyright law. Due to the confluence of several factors — chief among them an expiring 20-year freeze on the release of certain works — on January 1, 2019, a huge number of copyrighted works from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century came into the public domain. Among them was the original cartoon, *Felix the Cat*; Cecil B. DeMille's film, *The Ten Commandments* (not the familiar version starring Charlton Heston, but DeMille's first effort from 1923); and a number of novels by Aldous Huxley.

Once a copyrighted work comes into the public domain, its creator's heirs no longer have any say over how it can be used. Anyone can repurpose the text, music or images in a future publication without having to pay royalties to the author's or composer's estate.

Copyrights are not forever. The framers of the U.S. Constitution saw to that, when they specifically granted Congress the right to establish copyright law. Originally, copyrights lasted for 14 years, with the option of a 14-year extension. Today, most copyrights last for either 75 years or the life of the author plus 50 years. Once these

works enter the public domain, though, they're fair game for anyone who wants to republish or perform them.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews makes use of an image that is very much in the public domain: the cross of Jesus Christ. In our text for today the author never actually uses the word cross but talks about how Jesus had to be fully human and made us holy, set us apart through His suffering. The image that comes to mind immediately when anyone mentions Jesus' suffering ... is the cross. This cross has never been private. It has always been in the public domain. "The Lord is ... patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). [NOTE 2]

In today's text, Jesus' suffering on the cross is held up for all to see. That was the intention of the Roman legionnaires when they erected three crosses — one each for Jesus and two thieves — on the crest of a skull-shaped hill. They wanted the suffering of these three men to be a stern warning to all who might hesitate for even a moment to offer total devotion to Caesar.

That was true for a few days, but once the good news of resurrection burst forth upon the earth, the cross of Jesus Christ began to bear a very different message. In the centuries since, the church has not hesitated to display the cross as a central feature of its proclamation of good news. *The cross has been in the public domain* from the moment Mary Magdalene ran back to her friends, proclaiming "I have seen the Lord!" The cross of Jesus belongs to everyone. It is the central symbol of our faith: an image of awe, wonder and profound gratitude for all who gaze upon it.

Our tendency in the midst of suffering is to turn on God. To get angry and bitter and shake our fist at the sky and say, "God, you don't know what it's like! You don't understand! You have no idea what I'm going through. You don't have a clue how much this hurts." The cross is God's way of taking away all of our accusations, excuses and arguments. The cross is God taking on flesh and blood and saying, "Me too." —Rob Bell, *Sex God* (HarperCollins, 2010). [NOTE 3]

In his commentary on the gospel of John, John Calvin celebrates the central role of this image in the church's proclamation: "For in the cross of Christ, as in a splendid theatre, the incomparable goodness of God is set before the whole world. The glory of God shines, indeed, in all creatures on high and below, but never more brightly than in the cross."

For centuries, the medieval church sought both to display the cross and to manage it in such a way as to corner the market on it. Among the most prized of holy relics the bishops sold and arranged to be carried to all corners of the Christian world — often preserved in golden, jewel-encrusted containers — were splinters of the true or original Cross (or so the relic-merchants claimed). Displayed in ornate cathedrals, these desiccated chips of wood became objects of veneration for pilgrims — often serving as the foundation of the tourist economies of cathedral cities. It became a way to make money. People started to claim powers for certain relics and almost started to worship them. [NOTE 4]

Martin Luther and the other Protestant reformers took understandable offense at the crass commercialism of the medieval relics trade. In their churches, they ended the veneration of relics, which they considered idolatrous. It is just plain wrong to make money from selling “relics” especially if they are stretching the truth as to where they came from. It’s often been observed that, were all these splinters of the True Cross ever to be gathered up and displayed in one place, the pile of wood fragments would produce a 30 foot cross. But, no matter. When something is in the public domain, it can be reproduced endlessly. What is it that makes a cross the True Cross? Surely it is not necessary that the wood come from the same tree as the original instrument of torture on which Jesus died. That venerable wood — if any of it actually survives, which is doubtful — possesses no magical power. To a person contemplating its form with an open and receptive heart, a cross made of silver, iron or even plastic conveys the same powerful insight as a purportedly ancient relic. So it doesn’t matter how big the cross is in the front of a church, whether it is lighted or not, what it’s made of. There are many churches that don’t even have a cross in the front. [NOTE 5]

Now I am a traditional guy and I turn 60 next Spring. I know intellectually that it is not absolutely necessary that there be a cross in the front of a church for you or me to worship God. But there is something about it that just doesn’t feel right to me. Before I became your Pastor here in Doster I pastored a church plant in Wayland called Voice of Hope Church. We didn’t have a church building so we met in the Middle School and then later met in the Fine Arts Center lobby/lunch room at the high school. There was no cross. Sometime during my second year there I found a cross that someone had made from some weathered 4x4’s in storage and asked one of the guys in the church to make a stand for it so we could have a cross up in front. After that I felt more comfortable and less like I was stuck worshiping in a school building. [NOTE 6]

The message of Hebrews is that the cross is not confined within a jewel-encrusted reliquary nor hung high between the soaring stone walls of a cathedral. Its saving power goes forth to all the earth, to all who prayerfully consider what our Lord has done for us in giving his life for our salvation. Hebrews 2:14 reads, “Since the children have flesh and blood, He too shared in their humanity so that by His death He might break the power of him who hold the power of death —that is, the devil.” So by His suffering on the cross Jesus broke down the wall, tore the temple curtain in two, opening the way for us to have a personal relationship with God the Father! There is power in the cross. The cross opens the way, because Jesus’ blood covers our sins, so the God of justice sees not our sins but Jesus’ blood covering them. So we can approach the throne with our prayer requests and all our needs with boldness because Jesus considers us brothers and sisters.

Preacher and author N.T. Wright tells this story: I was talking to somebody not long ago who said, “You know, I used to believe in God; but then, as I grew up, I found it harder and harder to think of this old man up there in the sky, so far removed from all the pain and suffering down here in the world.” And I said to him, “I don’t believe in that god either! The God I believe in is the God I see in the middle of the pain and the

suffering down here in the world. Without Jesus, the crucified Jesus, sharing and bearing the pain and sin and suffering of the world, I don't actually know who on earth or in heaven God might be at all." You see, if you envisage a god up there in the sky, detached from the reality of the world, any worship you offer will simply be a distant acknowledgement of majesty, like the ploughboy tipping his cap as the great nobleman rides by ignoring him.

And if you go the other route, as my friend was inclined to, and say that therefore the word "god" can only refer to the impulse of goodness inside ourselves, then you'll find it pretty hard to sustain any real sense of worship at all. All you're left with is the ploughboy imagining himself to be a nobleman.

But if Jesus is to be the lens through which you glimpse the beauty of God, you will discover what it means to worship, because you will discover what it means to be loved. —N.T. Wright, *For All God's Worth: True Worship and the Calling of the Church* (Eerdmans, 1997), 9-10.

In late 2016, a Missouri pastor by the name of Brian Zahnd and his wife went on a pilgrimage walk along *El Camino de Santiago*, the 500-mile footpath across northern Spain. As a Protestant immersing himself in Roman Catholic religious practice, he immediately noticed the prevalence of crucifixes along the route. Writing about the experience months later, he described the **start** of their journey in this way: "After a long trek across the Pyrenees mountains from St.-Jean-Pied-de-Port, France we arrived in Roncesvalles, Spain. In Roncesvalles I spent some time alone in a 13<sup>th</sup>-century chapel gazing on a medieval crucifix. While sitting in this dimly lit sanctuary the Holy Spirit seemed to give me four instructions for my 500-mile walk: Enter every church you can. Pay close attention to every crucifix you see. Ask this question: What does this mean? Don't be too quick to give an answer." [NOTE 7]

Brian found that fourfold pilgrimage discipline to be spiritually transformative. He continues: "If we're too quick to give an answer, we domesticate the crucifixion. This is the bane of tidy atonement theories. Instead of the crucifixion remaining a compelling story, it's turned into a sterile formula. The cross is shrunk to one of the four spiritual laws or one of the three steps to salvation. This is the crucifixion sanitized — the cross made palatable and devoid of scandal. So I gave no quick answer to the question." Brian tells of several insights that emerged, as he and his wife contemplated all those crucifixes over the course of his journey. [NOTE 7a]

First, *he was impressed by how scandalous the cross is*. "The crucifixion is the damning indictment of the world as it has been arranged. When the Son of God entered our world, our systems of violent empire and sacrificial religion nailed him to a tree. This is the moment when the principalities and powers that run the world were put to shame and their claims of being wise and just were shown to be nothing but an empty sham." In Colossians chapter 2 and verse 14 and 15 we read, "He canceled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross. 15 In this way, He disarmed the spiritual rulers and authorities. He shamed them publicly by His victory over them on the cross." [NOTE 7b]

Second, *he was impressed by the cross as "an image of unspeakable pain."*

After many days of walking, he began to suffer — as many pilgrims do — from blisters on his feet. He wrote these words in his journal: “I’ve believed all along that God wants me to walk this Camino; and if I’m supposed to walk 200 miles or more in pain, so be it. Jesus was a man of sorrows, acquainted with pain. So as I walk with pain I try to remember those I know who live with pain — physical, emotional, mental and spiritual pain. And I pray for them. ‘By his wounds we are healed’ (1 Peter 2:24). Here is a mystery: When we bring our wounds to the wounds of Christ, it does not increase woundedness, but tends toward healing.” [NOTE 7c]

Third, Brian became aware of *the great beauty of all those crucifixes as works of art*. “Of course, this is a very strange thing. On a purely objective level there is nothing beautiful about the sight of man being tortured to death. And yet beauty is present in the crucifixion of Jesus, and artists render us a great service by calling our attention to it. Shining through the grotesque ugliness of human torture and murder is the beauty of divine love and forgiveness. ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’ (Luke 23:34) This is the beauty that saves the world.” Indeed it is. Thank God that such beauty is in the public domain! Any of us who follow Jesus can and should seek, in our lives, to display the cross of Jesus so all the world can see it. In fact, when I turned 16 my paternal grandma gave me a cross made of that plastic material that is full of holes that people wind yarn through. Then about a decade ago I got two more. I have never had a car for long that didn’t have one or now three crosses hanging from the rear-view mirror. “Lift high the cross,” goes the well-known processional hymn, “The love of Christ proclaim till all the world adore his sacred name.” That’s the cross — in the public domain. —*Greg Peters, Melanie Silva, Rick Stewart and Carl Wilton contributed to this material.*

What can you do this week to lift high the cross? How can you put God’s message to you today into practice this year? Please write an “I will...statement”. May each and every one of us “lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim, till all the world adores His sacred name!” Let’s pray ... AMEN

**Sermon Notes for “In the Public Domain” based on Hebrews 2: 9b-18**  
**Given in Doster Church on January 1, 2023**

- I. The Cross is for everyone. What happened on that cross was for everyone. Jesus paid the debt that we all owed, His blood paid the debt for all sin, past, present, and future, for all.
- II. The Romans wanted Jesus’ suffering and the suffering of the two thieves to be very public as a stern warning to all who might consider anything other than total devotion to Caesar.
- III. Jesus’ resurrection changed everything. A symbol of death and suffering is now a symbol of forgiveness, salvation, mercy, and love. The Cross belongs to everyone. It is the central symbol of our faith.
- IV. At one point the church tried to make money off the cross. They tried to sell splinters of the actual cross that Jesus hung on. But when something is in the public domain, it can be reproduced endlessly.
- V. It doesn’t matter what the cross is made of, where it is, or how it is displayed. It tells all of the love of God, in that He sent His Son to die to pay the debt that we owed.
- VI. Jesus was fully human. He broke the power of death. There is power in the cross.
- VII. Don’t be too quick to answer the question, “What does the cross mean to you?”
  - a. The cross is scandalous. It proclaims victory.
  - b. It is an image of unspeakable pain. By His wounds we are healed.
  - c. The cross is beautiful. Lift High the Cross.