

## Epiphany III A 2017

For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Many things suggest themselves as topics for preaching, you can imagine.

The great twentieth century theologian Karl Barth said that responsible preaching has the Bible in one hand and the New York Times in the other.

So there is a lot to consider in the New York Times and a lot in the Bible.

And indeed, some things are covered in both: I can preach about Syria, violence, sexuality, the plight of the poor, and new rulers from either source!

It is the preacher's responsibility to speak the Gospel to the powers and principalities of the world and to hold up to God's people the evidence in the world of God's care and love, of Christ's presence and of their duty to follow him in real time.

So we need to think about war and peace, elections, refugees, and the use of our bodies, energy, and money, in light of the Gospel.

Even if I took no notice of current events, the Bible would lead us, or allow us, to consider, if we wished, history, ethics, anthropology, aesthetics, the sacraments, and a million matters of philosophy and theology.

All of that could be interesting and might be a tremendous waste of time, if not centered in the Gospel.

What we do here, we do in light of the Gospel, which is the message of the Cross.

Sometimes, like every human being, I know we wish it weren't. The Cross is hard.

It invites sorrow for our sins and self-denial.

I might rather preach on Christmas than Good Friday.

Certainly, more people come to preaching on Christmas or Easter than Good Friday.

Almost, as though the Cross is too much for us to bear.

We are prone to avoid the suffering of others, we try to cheer them up or avert our eyes; and perhaps the suffering of Christ is even more than we can take.

Perhaps we want a hero more than a fellow-sufferer.

We want victory not his sympathy for us.

We want magic rather than divine solidarity.

And we might like to think about the things the newspaper suggests outside of the light of the cross.

It can be hard to think about those things in light of the Cross; more is demanded of us.

And so sometimes sermons descend to therapeutic babble or political meandering or take up something lesser than the fullness of the Gospel.

At least, I know mine sometimes do!

And so Paul put before the Corinthians and puts before us the Cross, persistently.

If there are any people in Scripture most like us, it may be the worldly and sometimes arrogant people of Corinth, who thought themselves pretty smart.

And to them, Paul offered the Cross.

It needs no eloquence, indeed, such eloquence we hear today may reduce its power.

Rather, the Cross need only be revealed in its inherent power, the love of God and the forgiveness of sins, revealed in it.

Note the present continuous: For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who *are perishing*, but to us who are *being* saved it is the power of God.

The cross is such a living reality, his death such a force for new life, that it is present to us, active in us and in the church now.

If we remain intent on seeing and receiving it.

This meal we share and these Scriptures we read are the chief means to continually re-mind us that the cross of Christ is all of our hope.

Before us again today, as often in the early part of the church's year, is the call of the first disciples. Peter and Andrew and James and John, leaving behind fathers and nets and boats and businesses to follow Jesus.

He told them he would make them fish for people, and they accepted that mysterious invitation.

They sensed something in him that led to their decision: divine presence? Embodied forgiveness?

The power of the universe?

Something like that, something of ultimate motivating power led them to follow him.

If we wish to hear his call and respond with all of our being, it will not be to clever reflections on interesting parts of Scripture, though we may have those here and there.

We respond to the simple good news that he died for us.

Add to that what you will; that it was for the forgiveness of sins, that it was to show the love of God, that it was to be with us in our shame and transform it, that he died to be raised, to open eternal life.

But know that his death in suffering love, his Cross, to use Paul's shorthand, is the foundational motivator and attraction of this faith.

His loss of all on the cross is meant to pierce our busy-ness, our hardness of heart, to move us to follow him, as Peter and Andrew, as James and John.

It is the news we must treasure and share before all else.

Upon it a life of holiness and love can be built.