

This month, we've been looking at stories that show us what it looks like to have an authentic encounter with Jesus. We talked about Jacob, who wrestled with God. Then we heard Isaiah's story and we learned that the answer to our brokenness is God's holiness. God's holiness reveals my sinfulness, and God's grace brings my healing and leads to me into my destiny. With each of these encounters, we've been asking the question: What do I want? So if you will, get a piece of paper (maybe the back of the insert) and write that question again: What do I want? And then write these three things: My choice, my encounter, my time.

Any *Lost* fans in the room? During the second season of *Lost*, the survivors discovered a computer inside the Swan station. The computer required a series of numbers to be entered into it every 108 minutes. There was a timer in the wall that counted down the time and an alarm would sound when the time neared zero. So they had to enter the right numbers in the right sequence then push the execute button to reset the timer to 108 minutes and start a new countdown. In the beginning, they weren't sure what would happen if the button was not pushed. They found out later that not pushing the button was catastrophic. Not pushing the button would set off a chain of events that would end up with the destruction of all life on Earth. The future of humanity depended on them remembering the sequence of numbers and being there to push the button every 108 minutes.

So ... I'm thinking about this because I'm thinking about grace and works and the guy who actually did the work of nailing Jesus to the cross. It was a Centurion soldier ... a Roman soldier in charge of 100 men. We don't even know the guy's name but his part in the drama of the cross is pretty powerful. In Matthew, chapter 27, Jesus is in Jerusalem. He's been there a few days. He came to celebrate Passover and when he got to town, there was a huge street scene and Jesus was sort of caught up in it as a celebrity figure. Then things began to unravel.

Judas, one of the followers of Jesus, decided to force an incident. He showed up with some religious leaders who were hostile toward Jesus and they took him by force to the governor's office for prosecution. It should never have happened but somehow, the governor allowed them to crucify Jesus. He had not committed a chargeable offense. But there he was ... Jesus ... carrying a cross up a hill after being flogged mercilessly to within an inch of his life.

*Matthew 27:32-37 – As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross. (because Jesus was weak from the flogging) 33 They came to a place called Golgotha (which means “the place of the skull”). 34 There they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; (that was the normal pain killer for crucifixions) but after tasting it, he refused to drink it. 35 When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots. 36 And sitting down, they kept watch over him there. 37 Above his head they placed the written charge against him: THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS.*

Soldiers would have carried out the orders of the governor. Soldiers would have flogged him, and soldiers would have led him up the hill with the cross tie on his back, and soldiers would have nailed him to the cross and soldiers would have drawn straws or cast lots for his clothes. And then they would have sat down to wait for him to die so they could take him off the cross and send his body off with whatever person was willing to take it. If no one took the body, it would have been left there outside the city to rot and be eaten by dogs.

The soldiers who tended to Jesus' execution would have had no idea they were participating in something that would change the world. It was sort of the opposite of *Lost*. In the plot of *Lost*, they had to push the button every 108 minutes in order to avoid destruction. But in *Saved* (which is what I'm calling this episode of Jesus and the cross), it's the death of Jesus that stops

that maddening cycle of striving that humans have been working at since the beginning of time. Its that “every 108 minutes” mentality. I have to keep pushing buttons. I can’t get outside myself or my own head because I have to stay focused on my own survival. My value is based on some random sequence of numbers I’m constantly punching in (the right amount of money, the right address, the right whatever ...) so I can reboot my own sense of security ... but it only lasts for a little while. Then I have to do it again. That’s the human condition. But the cross came to be that one sacrifice for all time. It allows us to opt out off the treadmill and find our value in something bigger than ourselves.

This is how Paul talks about the cosmic shift that happened with the cross (Romans 3:21-28, *The Message*) - *In our time something new has been added. What Moses and the prophets witnessed to all those years has happened. The God-setting-things-right that we read about has become Jesus-setting-things-right for us. And not only for us, but for everyone who believes in him. For there is no difference between us and them in this. Since we've compiled this long and sorry record as sinners (both us and them) and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us, God did it for us. Out of sheer generosity he put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift. He got us out of the mess we're in and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. And he did it by means of Jesus Christ. 25-26 God sacrificed Jesus on the altar of the world to clear that world of sin. Having faith in him sets us in the clear ... What we've learned is this (hear this ... this is huge): God does not respond to what we do; we respond to what God does. We've finally figured it out. Our lives get in step with God and all others by letting him set the pace, not by proudly or anxiously trying to run the parade.*

The cross is our choice to respond to what God has done ... and to let Him set the pace.

The most powerful scene for me in the movie, *The Passion*, was when Jesus finally reached the cross. Maybe you remember it. Jesus has just been hideously scourged and afterwards he is led out of Pilate's fortress and onto the road he will walk carrying his cross. And just as he steps out of the fortress, they step in front of him to give him the cross he'll carry and when they place it in front of him, he sort of falls on it and embraces it.

As he embraces the cross, the look on his face goes ... just for a moment ... from anguish to something like relief or compassion or hope or maybe even ... love. To me, that was such a powerful interpretation of Jesus' relationship to his cross. In that scene, the cross was not his enemy. Instead it was his goal, his choice ... his reason for being here at all. It was the gate he came through to get to his sheep, just as he prophesied in John, chapter 10. He said, "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." The cross is a choice for abundant life.

**Not everyone gets that.** Go back to the story in Matthew. (Matthew 27:38-50) - *Two rebels were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. 39 Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads 40 and saying, "You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!" 41 In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. 42 "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! He's the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. 43 He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'*" 44 *In the same way the rebels who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him. 45 From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land. 46 About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice,*

*“Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”).  
47 When some of those standing there heard this, they said, “He’s calling Elijah.” 48  
Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a staff,  
and offered it to Jesus to drink. 49 The rest said, “Now leave him alone. Let’s see if Elijah  
comes to save him.” 50 And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his  
spirit.*

There are all these people around the cross ... around that world-changing moment ... who don’t get it. Who are in the presence of Pure Love, and somehow they’ve missed it. ***And I’m thinking that you could spend your whole life sitting at the foot of the cross and never get who Jesus is. And the whole time, he’s loving you like no one else ever has.*** The whole time, he’s sacrificing for you.

I want to show you a little video I found a while back. It won an award at the Cannes Film Festival last year. In fifteen seconds, they have brilliantly captured the spirit of sacrificial love.

**(SHOW VIDEO – <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AKvXrUlaRAQ>)**

That’s the kind of love we find on the cross. Here on this cross is an act of love so deep, so profound ... that only God could accomplish it. A love stubborn enough to hang with us when we want to argue the point ... A love so severe that, as Paul put it to the Hebrews, he would also become flesh and blood so he could be in every respect like us ... so he could be our merciful and faithful high priest before God ... lifting us before the throne. The kind of love that will never give up on us ... that will suffer with us, die for us. The kind of love that is both whole and holy, giving and forgiving, universal and everlasting.

And we are invited into an encounter with this Love. We can sit at the foot of it and see nothing and get nothing. Or we can bring everything we've got to it and let Jesus take all our pain, all our tragedy, all our heartaches, all our mistakes and flaws ... and nail them up there so that from this point forward, it's not us who have to prove our value. Jesus does it for us. That's the encounter he invites us to. And the great news is that it's never too late.

Listen to the last scene of the story. (Matthew 27:51-53) - *51 At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split 52 and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. 53 They came out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people. 54 When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!"*

In that moment, you get this sense that suddenly this guy sees Jesus as the truth and himself as the crime. And we just read from Paul that there is no "us and them" in this equation. We are all in the same boat. Jesus is the truth and we are the crime. And this guy ... this Roman officer with influence over 100 men ... is the last one Jesus influences on his way out of this human body and he's the first one to encounter the truth of the resurrection. The cross was for all humanity and it was for that one guy.

There is a great musical work by Johann Sebastian Bach based on Matthew's passion story. N.T. Wright tells the story behind it. Toward the end of the piece, Bach brings in the Centurion's confession: "Truly, this was the Son of God." Since it is one guy's line, you expect it to be sung by a soloist, but Bach gives that line to the whole chorus. And it isn't sung in the key usually used when a human is speaking. It is sung in the key normally reserved for

Christ himself. And into the bass line, Bach has woven the musical letters that represent his own name. It's a brilliant interpretation of what happened in that scene.

Because that line of the Centurion ... "Surely, this is the Son of God!" ... was for that one guy, and for all humanity. He might have been the first to say it, but a whole chorus of people have said it since. The cross is for all humanity and the cross is for you and me personally. And we *don't* sing it in our own key, because even our faith is a gift of God. God has sung this truth into us. Remember what Paul said? ***God does not respond to what we do; we respond to what God does.*** And now, because of the cross, we have this great choice to respond ***in His key*** ... and to have our names woven into His song.

CINDY COMES) That "108 minute mentality" can do a number on you. The striving, the anxiety, the constant sense of your own unworthiness ... feeling always like we've got to push all these buttons and that its all up to us? There is another option. The cross is that one sacrifice for all time ... an invitation to let God set the pace.

As we've done each week with this series, I want to ask you to take a moment now to write your thoughts. What do you want? This is your choice, your encounter, your time to respond to what God has done. Some of us have spent years in church ... maybe your whole life ... and you still don't know who Jesus is ... for you. And the whole time, he's loving you like no one else ever has. What is your response to that? Take a moment to write your thoughts.