

“Unprecedented”
Sermon Series on *The Cross* #7
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First Presbyterian Church Winston-Salem, NC
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(Mark 16:1-8)

Introduction.

Every year the users of dictionary.com are invited to vote on the Word of the Year. What word do you think won the People’s Choice Award for Word of the Year in 2020? It was the word “unprecedented”. It barely edged out “pandemic” which was followed by “lockdown” and “chaos.” The word “quarantine” rounded out the top five if you’re keeping score at home.

2020 will go down as a year unlike any other in our lifetimes, and if I had a dollar for every time I heard the word “unprecedented,” I could easily fund a missionary overseas for a year. In 2020 we had the worst pandemic the world has seen in a hundred years, our country was coming to terms with a racial reckoning because of our history of slavery and discrimination, and I can’t remember a worse season of political turmoil than during the election last fall. One writer said, “In 2020 it felt like we were dealing with plagues of biblical proportions. The only thing left was an infestation of locusts. Then *that* happened in Africa and India in August!”

The dictionary defines the word “unprecedented” as: “without previous instance; never before known or experienced; unexampled or unparalleled.” By this definition it’s easy to understand why all of us have used this word a lot to describe the past year. However, as unprecedented as this year may have seemed to us, I would suggest that the uniqueness of what we’ve experienced the past 12 months pales in comparison to the unprecedented nature of the Incarnation and in particular the events surrounding the resurrection of Jesus Christ we celebrate today. Jesus and His resurrection truly were unprecedented.

I. Jesus’ Birth was Unprecedented.

The apostle John says his gospel: *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (3:16)*. This declaration John makes is that the birth of Jesus wasn’t just any ordinary birth. Rather, it was unprecedented. Jesus was actually God’s Son come in the flesh, and the gospel writers Matthew and Luke go to great lengths to explain how what was conceived in Mary was from God. The virgin birth is a central tenet of the Christian faith.

The word that is translated *begotten* in John’s gospel is the Greek word *monogenas*. *Mono* means “one”, as in the word “monologue” where one person is doing the talking (like I’m doing now!), and *genas*, from which we get our English words “genes”, “genetic”, and “gender,” and it means “of the same kind” or “of the same nature.” In other words, *monogenas* literally means “one of a kind.”

When God came to planet earth 2000 years ago in the form of a little baby, He was literally God with skin on! Philip Yancey writes, “One night in the cold, in the dark, among the wrinkled

hills of Bethlehem, [the] two worlds [of matter and spirit] came together at a dramatic point of intersection. God, who knows no before or after, entered time and space. God, who knows no boundaries took on the shocking constraints of a baby's skin, the ominous restraints of mortality.”¹

In one instant the omnipotent made Himself weak. He who had been spirit became flesh. Yancey says that the One who was larger than the universe became an embryo, and He who sustains the world simply with a word chose to be dependent upon the nourishment of a teenage girl. God was given eyebrows, elbows, two kidneys, and a spleen. He stretched against the walls of a uterus and floated in the amniotic fluids of His mother. God came near.

The result is that now we date our calendars based on Jesus’ birth. Every time you open a calendar, unfold a newspaper, or boot up your computer, you’re reminded that Jesus Christ is the hinge of human history. Today we date things based on what happened before Jesus was born (BC) and what has happened since (AD). There was never a baby or a birth like Jesus’. It was unprecedented.

II. Jesus’ Ministry and His Teaching were Unprecedented.

Early in His ministry Jesus gave what is arguably the most famous, most studied, and most often-quoted sermon in history – the Sermon on the Mount. In it He said, *“You have heard that it said..., but I say to you....”* And the people were amazed because they said He taught as one with authority, not like the other teachers of the Jewish law they had heard.

His message was revolutionary. He called people to love their enemies and pray for those who persecuted them. He urged His followers to turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, and give to anyone who asks. When someone questioned Jesus about forgiveness and asked, “How many times do I need to forgive my brother or sister?”, and then generously suggested seven times, Jesus answered, “No. You should forgive them seventy-seven times” – implying a limitless number.

Jesus healed cripples, restored sight to the blind, and He cured people who suffered from leprosy. He walked on water, He calmed a storm, and the wind and the waves obeyed His command. At a wedding reception in Cana, Jesus turned 120 gallons of water into wine, and He spared the host the embarrassment of running out. And on two occasions He fed thousands of people with food leftover. The bread and the fish just seemed to keep multiplying.

Jesus also broke down social barriers, and He overcame social class. He welcomed women, something no rabbi had ever done before, and He challenged the social structures of the day. Critics called Him a drunkard and a glutton, but He didn’t care because He wanted to minister to people who were on the margins of society, and He welcomed folks everyone else rejected.

Eventually Jesus’ message and His methods got Him killed. He set His face like a flint toward Jerusalem, and He told His disciples He was going there to die. Christ intentionally walked down a path that was on a collision course with the Jewish and Roman power structures of the day, and He forced their hand and provoked a confrontation. As a result, He was condemned of blasphemy by the Jews and convicted of treason by the government. All this led to his unprecedented death.

III. Jesus’ Death was Unprecedented.

During this season of Lent, we have focused our attention on the cross of Jesus for the past several weeks. While there are many people who were crucified in the ancient world during the first century, the execution of Jesus at the hands of the Romans was unprecedented.

In her landmark book *The Crucifixion* Fleming Rutledge writes, “Christianity is unique. The world’s religions have certain traits in common, but until the gospel of Jesus Christ burst upon the Mediterranean world, no one in the history of human imagination had conceived of such a thing as the worship of a crucified man...The peculiarity of this beginning for a world-transforming faith is not sufficiently acknowledged.”²

Indeed, it is not. No one could have dreamed this up. No one would ever have thought of a crucified person uniting the world. And yet the cross has become the single most famous symbol in human history, and it reminds all of us of the incredible sacrifice Jesus made to reconcile the world to God. Rutledge points out that there have been many famous deaths in history – John Kennedy was assassinated, Marie Antoinette was executed by a guillotine, and Princess Diana died in a car accident. However, we don’t talk about *the* assassination, *the* beheading, or *the* car crash. But we do talk about *the* crucifixion.

The Gospel writers devote fully one-third to one-half of their stories about Jesus to the last few days of His life – His suffering and His death. It’s clear that from their perspective the passion and death of Jesus was *the* central feature of His life, and it was the reason for His coming in the first place. That was His mission. Only two of the writers of the gospels include information about the birth of Jesus, but all four of them write extensively about His death.

What happened to Jesus was unique in human history. It was unprecedented. And the reason is because Jesus didn’t just die a physical death. He actually bore the sin of the world and the judgment of God in a way that affected the entire cosmos. Jesus became a curse for you and for me, and in Christ God reconciled the world to Himself. And the curtain of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom, making a way open to everyone into the Holy of Holies and the very presence of God.

IV. Jesus’ Resurrection was Unprecedented.

What brings us together today, however, isn’t the birth of Jesus, the ministry or teaching of Christ, or even His death – all of which were unprecedented. What brings us together this Easter morning is His resurrection. And that single event was *the* most unprecedented aspect of Jesus’ already unprecedented life. It never happened before, and the resurrection changed everything.

The uniqueness of our faith is that Christianity traces its origin to one particular moment on one particular day in history. This is not true for Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, or any other religion. According to Matthew’s gospel, when Jesus appeared to His disciples after He rose from the dead, the first thing He said to them was, “Greetings.” That comes pretty close to saying, “Hey, how are you doing? Nice day, isn’t it?” Dale Bruner’s wonderful commentary on the gospel of Matthew translates it: “Jesus met his disciples and said, ‘Hi!’” It’s almost as though Jesus was saying, “What did you expect?” In other words, “Didn’t I tell you this was going to happen?”

A pastor once tried to tell the story of the resurrection to some children during a worship service in a children’s sermon, and he posed the question, “What were Jesus’ first words to the disciples after He was raised from the dead?” Before he could give the answer, a little girl

waved her hand, and the pastor called on her. “I know,” she said. “Jesus’ first words were, “Ta da!” That’s as good a translation as any.³

On the day after Jesus’ death, it looked as if whatever small mark He left on the world would rapidly disappear. Instead, His impact has been – dare I say it? – unprecedented. John Ortberg writes that normally, when someone dies, their impact would immediately recede. However, Jesus inverted this normal trajectory of history. Jesus’ impact was greater 100 years after His death than during His lifetime. It was greater still after 500 years. After a thousand years His legacy laid the foundation for much of Europe, and now two thousand years later He has more followers in more places than ever before.⁴

Jesus never married. He never wrote a book. He never held an office or led an army. He never did any of the things one usually associates with greatness. And yet 20 centuries later you and I are talking about Him today. Why is that? It’s because the grave couldn’t hold Him, and He rose from the dead just like He said He would. It was unprecedented.

The former Soviet Union tried to stamp out any vestige of the Christian faith, and Stalin was determined to eliminate it from Russian life. But after years of trying to do that, a leader in the Soviet Union grew so frustrated at the stubbornness of the Christian faith he said, “Christianity is like a nail. The harder you strike it, the deeper it goes.”⁵ And so it is that now 2000 years later we are gathered here on Easter Sunday to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord. It is unprecedented.

Conclusion.

The problems you and I encountered this past year and the challenges we’ve experienced since the pandemic began aren’t really all that unprecedented. Even though there is a part of us that thinks nobody has ever gone through anything like what we’ve experienced, that really isn’t true. Pandemics, economic volatility, political strife, and racial conflict, as great as these problems are, are as old as the world itself and have affected humanity ever since the Fall.

What truly is unprecedented is the fact that God came to earth in human form, was born in a manger, died on a cross, and rose again from the dead. Now that was unprecedented. This means that the God who made everything at creation is now making everything new again in re-creation, and it begins with the building of His kingdom right here on earth with you and me. It’s the promise of hope the resurrection brings.

The best news in all of this is that because of the unprecedented resurrection of Jesus Christ, you and I can now have an unprecedented future with Jesus in this life and in the world to come. In his book *King’s Cross* Tim Keller writes⁶ that every Easter he thinks about Joni Eareckson Tada. She was in an accident when she was seventeen years old, and ever since then she has been a quadriplegic, paralyzed from the neck down. While she was still coming to terms with this horrible accident, she would go to church in her wheelchair.

Joni found that the problem with being in a wheelchair was that at a certain point in her church’s liturgy each Sunday, the priest invited everyone to kneel, which drove home the fact that she was stuck in a wheelchair. On one occasion she was at a convention during which the speaker urged people to get down on their knees and pray, and everyone did, except Joni. She said, “With everyone kneeling, I certainly stood out. And I couldn’t stop the tears.”

However, she wasn’t crying because of self-pity. You see, God had done a transforming work in her life by His Spirit. She was crying because the sight of hundreds of people on their

knees before God was so beautiful to her. She said it was “a picture of heaven.” And then she continued weeping at another thought:

Sitting there, I was reminded that in heaven I will be free to jump up, dance, kick, and do aerobics. And... sometime before the guests are called to the banquet table at the Wedding Feast of the Lamb, the first thing I plan to do on resurrected legs is to drop on grateful, glorified knees. I will quietly kneel at the feet of Jesus.⁷

Then Joni adds, “I, with shriveled, bent fingers, atrophied muscles, gnarled knees, and no feeling from the shoulders down, will one day have a new body, light, bright, and clothed in righteousness – powerful and dazzling. Can you imagine the hope that the resurrection gives someone like me who is spinal cord-injured?”⁸

Only in the gospel of Jesus Christ do people find such enormous hope to live. Only the resurrection promises us not just new minds and hearts, but new bodies as well. They are going to be more perfect and more beautiful than you and I can imagine. They will be unprecedented.

If you can't dance and long to dance, in the resurrection you'll dance beautifully. If you're lonely and living in isolation, in the resurrection you'll have all the people you need, and you'll experience perfect love. If you're empty or exhausted, in the resurrection you'll be completely satisfied and full of energy. Our ordinary lives will be redeemed, and our brokenness will be too. The resurrection means that we can look forward with hope to the day when our suffering will end, and all will be glorious.

Live your life in the light of the resurrection and the renewal it brings today and join in the joyful dance of grace. Now that's something that truly is unprecedented! Amen.

¹Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 44, 45.

²Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).

³Cited by Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, vol. 2, The Churchbook (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 796.

⁴John Ortberg, *Who Is This Man?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012) 11. Some of the ideas in this sermon are drawn from John's very helpful book as well as some recent podcasts, and I'm indebted to him.

⁵Ortberg, 13.

⁶Tim Keller, *King's Cross* (New York: Dutton, 2011), 210-212.

⁷Joni Eareckson Tada, *Heaven: Your Real Home* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 51.

⁸Joni Eareckson Tada, 53.