

**Holy Cross Day**  
**September 13-14, 2008**  
**1 Corinthians 1:18**

**St. John's Lutheran Church**  
**Alexandria, Virginia**

***Back to Basics: Why the Cross?***  
**Articles II and III of the Augsburg Confession**

Symbols are powerful, aren't they? Just a few lines that are simply drawn can conjure up in us deep feelings and strong reactions. Let me show you what I mean (*have easel, chart paper and pen ready to draw several symbols: dollar sign, Nazi swastika, etc.*). And what of this symbol – the cross? Does it also conjure up in us deep feelings and strong reactions? Some of you may be wearing a cross – necklace, lapel pin, and here in this sanctuary, the cross is front and center; the focal point of our worship and devotion. Today, September 14, is Holy Cross Day on the church's calendar, and it gives us a good opportunity to stand back and reflect more deeply on this powerful symbol that tells an even more powerful story. Our fall preaching series, "Back to Basics," continues today as we focus on the core teachings of the Christian faith. And nothing is more basic and core to the Christian faith than the cross. And so that forms the basis of today's message under the theme, "Why the cross?" May the Lord's rich blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word, for Jesus' sake.

So, why the cross? That may seem like a silly question. After all, doesn't everybody know about the cross and what happened there? In a word: no. Everybody doesn't know about the cross and what happened there. There has been a lot of misinformation about the cross, and there is also be a lot of superstition surrounding it. For example, when Roman Emperor Constantine built the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem in 335 A.D., it was supposed to have been built on the site of Jesus' own sepulcher – that cave-like grave carved out of rock where Jesus' body was laid. And the very cross on which Christ was crucified was supposed to have been found there as well. Relics of the true cross were carried away by pilgrims to the far corners of the globe. Sometime between the years 385-388 A.D., a Spanish woman named Egeria made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. She kept a journal of what she saw and experienced, and tells of the practice of venerating the cross on Good Friday at the Church of Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. She wrote of how the deacons had to guard what was believed to be the true cross so that pilgrim who kissed it would not bite out pieces to carry away. Let's be clear here: our concern is not the wood of the cross but the One who gave his life upon the cross. When all the legends and superstitions are stripped away, what remains is Jesus' redeeming death. This is what Luther called the "theology of the cross," Christ's divinely-chosen way of humility and service, and of death as the path to life and salvation.

Recently, I had a conversation with someone who said, "Wasn't there an easier way for all this to happen? I mean, couldn't God have come up with something less gruesome and gory than crucifixion?" Good question! That question really is theme of today's message: "Why the cross?" If we take seriously Jesus' death upon the cross, then we also have to take seriously what caused Jesus to give us life upon that cross. This is what Scripture calls sin. Article II of the Augsburg Confession has this to say:

*It is also taught among us that since the fall of Adam all men sin who are born according to the course of nature are conceived and born in sin. That is, all men are full of evil lust and inclinations from their mothers' wombs and are unable by nature to have true fear of God and true faith in God. Moreover, this inborn sickness and hereditary sin is truly sin and condemns to the eternal wrath of God all those who are not born again through Baptism and the Holy Spirit. Rejected in his connection are the Pelagians and others who deny that original sin is sin, for they hold that natural man is made righteous by his own powers, thus disparaging the sufferings and merit of Christ.*

Our sin-sickness caused a breach, a fracture, in God's original design and purpose for creation. The remedy for this came through what happened upon the cross – through the redeeming work of Jesus, the Son of God. Article III of the Augsburg Confession puts it this way:

*It is also taught among us that God the Son became man, born of the virgin Mary, and that the two natures, divine and human, are so inseparably united in one person that there is one Christ, true God and true man, who was truly born, suffered, was crucified, died, and was buried in order to be a sacrifice not only for original sin but also for all other sins and to propitiate God's wrath. The same Christ also descended into hell, truly rose from the dead on the third day, ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of God, that he may eternally rule and have dominion over all creatures, that through the Holy Spirit he may sanctify, purify, strengthen, and comfort all who believe in him, that he may bestow on them life and every grace and blessing, and that he may protect and defend them against the devil and against sin. The same Lord Christ will return openly to judge the living and the dead, as stated in the Apostles' Creed.*

So, what happened on the tree of the cross at Calvary undid and reversed what happened through the tree there in the Garden of Eden, which brought sin into the world. We are baptized into what Christ did on the cross at Calvary. His sign and seal are traced upon our forehead, and we are marked as his beloved children. And so every time we make the sign of the cross, we are going back to what Christ did for us in our Baptism: washing us clean, forgiving our sins, clothing us with his righteousness and peace. Holy Cross Day takes us back to what happened on that hill outside Jerusalem on a dark Friday so very long ago. It is for us *Good* Friday – good because of Jesus did for us upon the cross.

And so as St. Paul says, **“This message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God”** (1 Corinthians 1:18). May God open hearts and minds who now consider the cross to be foolishness that they would see it as life and salvation. May God make it so for Jesus' sake. Amen.