

April 7, 2023 – Colossians 2:13-15

In the year 326 AD, the Emperor Constantine sent his mother, Helena, on a mission. She, like her son, had become a Christian, and he wanted her to go to the Holy Land, to map the region for other pilgrims wishing to visit Biblical sites, to build churches at those locations, and to collect any relics she might find and bring them back to Rome.

So she went and, of course, one of the first places she visited was Jerusalem, hoping to find the tomb of Jesus. But when she got to place where the locals said the tomb was located, she found something odd. Instead of a tomb, there was just a hill with the ruins of a temple to Venus on top of it. She discovered that when the Emperor Hadrian had rebuilt Jerusalem as a Roman city 200 years prior, he decided to mock the Christian faith by essentially building a pagan brothel on top of the site of Jesus' resurrection.

Well, Helena wouldn't stand for this outrage. She had the temple to Venus demolished and the site excavated. A tomb was indeed uncovered underneath. And inside she found three wooden crosses. They didn't know which one was Jesus' – if any of them – until one day a woman who had been ill for many years touched one in particular and was miraculously healed. They took this as a sign that this was the true cross of Christ and had it sent back to Rome.

Over the years, the cross was broken into pieces, each piece sent to various churches around the Roman Empire. Among them was a large piece sent to a monastery in Poitiers, France. Where a poet named Venantius Honorius Fortunatus wrote a hymn to celebrate its arrival. The hymn begins, “Sing, my tongue, the glorious battle; sing the ending of the fray. Now above the cross, the trophy, sound the loud triumphant lay; tell how Christ, the world's redeemer, as a victim won the day.” Of course, we just finished singing that very hymn.

I don't know how much of the story of Helena and the cross is true and how much is legend. A lot of it is probably legend, actually. But the hymn that Fortunatus wrote to celebrate the arrival of this relic is definitely real. And it's kind of odd that we have a hymn like this in our hymnal, isn't it? When Martin Luther spent so much time and energy preaching against the worship of relics?

However, what makes the hymn acceptable to us, as Lutherans, is not the circumstances of the relic arriving in Poitiers, but the way that Fortunatus talks about the cross. Because he doesn't refer to it as a relic to be worshipped. He describes it as a “trophy”. A monument to Christ's triumph. A memorial of how Christ, the world's redeemer, won the victory by becoming a victim.

Which is a crucial doctrine for Christians. One that is absolutely baffling, and yet completely true. And it turns out, that it's true many times throughout scripture. Each time with wood as a central element of the story. As if God wanted us to see in every piece of wood both a victim and a victor.

We see it, for example, in Noah's ark. One thing that's striking about that story is the instructions for the ark's construction. We call it Noah's ark, but it's really God's ark. Noah doesn't come up with the design himself. God gives him detailed instruction. And it is a massive wooden structure.

It has to be wooden. It can only save them if it is wooden. Noah and his family are all victims of this flood. Their homes, their lands, their livelihoods are destroyed in it.

And yet, they are victors over the flood through the wood of the ark. Through the wood that God gives to them, in every detail. The world and it's sin will be swept away in the flood, but Noah and his family will survive and triumph over all this death and destruction through the ark that God gives them.

We see it in Abraham sacrificing Isaac. Abraham takes Isaac up onto a mountain. They initially have servants coming with them to carry the supplies. But eventually Abraham tells Isaac to carry the wood for the sacrifice himself. He lays the wood on his son's shoulders. And Isaac is confused. Here is the fire. Here is the wood. But where is the sacrifice? My son, God will provide the sacrifice.

They get to the place where God has led them and Abraham builds an altar. He lays the wood down upon. Then lays his son upon the wood. His son is to be the victim in this sacrifice. Abraham raises the knife to slaughter his son, but God stops before he can continue.

God does not want him to kill Isaac. God only wants to see the faith in Abraham's heart. Faith that God will fulfill his covenant even if Isaac is killed. Faith that God could even raise Isaac from the dead if he so chooses.

By making Isaac a victim, Abraham is victorious. Victorious in faith. Faith that is credited to him as righteousness.

We see it in the staff of Moses. It's a simple wooden shepherd's staff. A tool used by a man who was once a prince of Egypt but now has lived in exile for murdering an Egyptian slavedriver. When Moses approaches Pharaoh for the first time, there is nothing about him or his simple staff that would keep Pharaoh from having him arrested and executed on the spot.

And yet, with that simple wooden staff, Moses does great things. With that staff he performs miracles. With that staff he brings down plagues. With that staff he parts the Red Sea. With that staff he brings water from a rock. With that staff, he is victorious over Pharaoh, over Pharaoh's army, over every obstacle put before them as he leads the people to the promised land.

That staff is no longer a symbol of his weakness and poverty and shame. It is a symbol of God's power to save his people. Moses is no victim anymore. He is a victor because of what God does through him.

Over and over and over again, simple pieces of wood, transforming victims into victors. Not by the strength of the people who wielded them. But by the God who gives them the power to save.

And so this evening we look upon the wood of the cross once again. Not as a relic with divine power inherent to it. For as Fortunatus said in our hymn so well, the cross is a noble tree, a true sign of triumph, and a symbol of the world's redemption not because the wood is special. No, it is all these things, because of the weight that hung upon it.

The body of our Lord, crucified for us. By becoming the victim, he gives us the victory. As St Paul puts it, in his crucifixion, He cancels our debt. He sets aside the demands of the law. The Law says that sin must be punished. That every sin must be atoned for. Every sin must be paid in full. And any sin that isn't paid, means death. Eternal, unending, inescapable death.

Jesus sets that penalty aside. How? By nailing it to the cross. Which is an interesting image when you think about it. We tend to think about the crucifixion as Romans nailing Jesus to the cross. And it was.

But that wasn't the only thing that was nailed to the cross that afternoon. And the Romans weren't the only ones who were doing the nailing. While they were nailing Jesus, Jesus was nailing our sins. He was nailing our death. He was nailing our punishment. Nailing it to the cross.

So that in that wood, we might not be victims of our sinfulness, but victors in his death. For he disarmed the rulers and authorities of hell and put them to shame. They thought they had won. They thought they had taken Jesus to the grave. They thought humanity was now defenseless and ripe for conquest. They thought they were the victors.

But the cross proved them to be the victims. Victims of their own pride. Jesus put them to shame and triumphed over them. He died and gave us life. He took our sin and gave us his forgiveness. And so took away Satan's only weapon. Disarmed him and proved just how weak he really is.

Whether the piece that arrived in Poitiers was real or not, the cross of Christ isn't a relic to be worshipped. But it is a trophy to be celebrated. It is a symbol of Jesus victory over sin, death, and the grave. It is a proclamation to all the world that Christ, the world's redeemer, as a victim won the day. How, with a simple piece of wood, the victim became victor. And gave that victory to us. Amen.