

HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

MARCH 27, 2022

MARK 8:34-9:1

“THE CROSS OF CHRIST”

Today we are mid-way through the season of Lent. And at this half-way point our tradition sets aside this Sunday for us as the Sunday of the Veneration of the Cross. The focus of the liturgy today is our Lord's death upon the cross which gives us eternal life and the forgiveness of our sins. To show our thanks to Christ for what He did for us, today we decorate the cross with flowers, we have a procession for it, we sing hymns about it, we bow down in veneration before it. For it was on the cross that Jesus won His victory.

Sometimes people say, “If God exists, why doesn't He show Himself to us? Why doesn't He reveal to us what He is like?” He has done that---on the cross on Great and Holy Friday. On the cross, the Lord revealed what He is like. Years ago at a retreat at our church, Father Thomas Hopko said, “God said it all on the cross.” Now, because of the cross, we know what God is like-----He is a God with infinite love for. The Lord is a Lord who suffers with us and for us.

As you know (I'm always telling you about it!), I'm from North Dakota. North Dakota gets lots of blizzards; real blizzards, not Cleveland style mild snow storms. Deadly blizzards.

A very bad one hit the little town in western North Dakota called Center. (Center is pretty close to Beulah, where Bonnie and I lived way back when I was a Methodist pastor.) Center got hit bad on March 16, 1920. Not much weather predicting 100 years ago, so the storm hit with very little warning. It was in the afternoon and school was in session. The teacher at the schoolhouse, as the storm began, told all the children to quickly go home before it got bad. But for teen-aged Hazel Minor and her little brother and sister, it wasn't quick enough. They quickly got moving on their horse-drawn sleigh towards their farm a ways out of town. On their way home the blizzard got so bad that there was zero visibility and the snow was already piling up deep. Hazel accidentally went off the road just a bit and the sleigh went sliding down into a coulee-----all the way to the bottom. No one

got hurt but the sleigh overturned.

They tried to untangle the horse and get the sleigh back upright but couldn't manage. So Hazel decided they would try to climb up the sides of the coulee and find their farm on foot. Hazel was young and strong and could get up the sides. But the little boy and girl couldn't make it, and no matter how Hazel tried to pull or carry them up, it was soon obviously not going to work. So they next took the blanket out of the sleigh and tried to make a little makeshift tent to protect them from the horrible wind. But it was so windy they couldn't manage it.

Meanwhile darkness had fallen and the temperature had fallen below zero. There was no way out. So Hazel told the children to lie down on the snow close together, hugging each other. Then she took the blanket and put it over them. Then she lay down on top of them---and that's how they spent the night.

A rescue party found them in the morning. The children were alive. Hazel had frozen to death. Hazel knew she by herself could have gotten out of the coulee. But she knew the children could not get out. So she stayed with them, deciding to keep them alive by dying for them. (Dakota Circle, Tom Isern, NDSU Press, 2000, pp. 30-32)

The story of Hazel Miner reminds of what Jesus Christ did for us. He did not have to be crucified. He could have just walked away. In His divine strength He could have destroyed His enemies instead of being killed by them. His death was very voluntary. Out of His infinite love for mankind, He did not walk away. Instead, He carried His cross, He let them drive the nails into His body, and He hung there in agony for hours. All voluntarily, all for us.

He did it to bring us forgiveness and eternal life. And so especially on this Sunday, we thank Him and celebrate the cross on which He died, on which He won His victory.

And so---if someone asks you: "What is God really like?". Or if sometimes you yourself wonder: "What is God really like?".....the answer is right here, on this crucifixion icon on the Mystery Table. *This* shows us what God is like. And that is why today we rejoice and celebrate!