

“He must increase”

### **Introduction to the Series**

This week we begin a new midweek meditation series titled *Images of Christ: The Way of the Cross*. This series continues the *Images of Christ* series of last fall, but with a new theme. This year’s theme is “The Way of the Cross,” a recognition of the commemoration of Holy Cross Day, September 14. The themes that emerge around following Jesus on the way of the cross are related to his words, “*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me*” (Mark 8:34). As we journey through the second half of the Season of Pentecost, we are mindful of the role of the cross as a way of self-denial, service to others, and discipleship to Jesus. The way of the cross is more than simply a theme for Lent. It is our Christian journey over a lifetime, following the one who was obedient unto death, who had compassion for others, who suffered on behalf of all humanity, and was raised to give hope and eternal life for all the world.

This series will make use of images of Christ and the cross from many historical, cultural and ethnic contexts, realizing that in the cross Christ has dwelt in all of humanity. As the infinite Word dwells in our finite humanity in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, so too, our finite flesh is capable, with God’s grace, of bearing the infinite Word. The way of the cross is Jesus’ invitation to all who would follow him; therefore, it is a way of incarnation and inculturation. Jesus calls people of all ethnicities, nations, genders and identities into new life in him and service to others.

This series will make use of Martin Luther’s dialectic of God hidden (*Deus absconditus*) and God revealed (*Deus revelatus*) in the cross. Luther’s *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518) is the source of Luther’s “theology of the cross,” and is one of the points of departure for Lutheran preaching and discourse about the cross. Luther wrote in the *Heidelberg Disputation*, “One deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross (Thesis 20).” Luther was concerned that Christians learn to look to the cross as the place where God is both hidden and revealed in suffering on behalf of others. It is God, not us, who chooses how God will reveal God’s self. The “visible and manifest” things of God are seen in Jesus who suffered for and served others.

God desires that we know God’s own self-revelation in Jesus who took upon himself the ultimate reality of our finite human existence: that we each will die. Regarding this Luther wrote, “The love of God which lives in humanity loves sinners, evil persons, fools, and weaklings in order to make them righteous, good, wise, and strong.” Luther called this “the love of the cross” (Thesis 28). Luther is interested in contrasting human love with divine love, arguing that human beings tend to love those who are like themselves, while avoiding those who seem different, sinful, evil or bad. In contrast, the love of God seeks out sinful people because God can confer grace and love upon those in need. Luther was aware in quoting Jesus’ words, “*I came not to call the righteous, but sinners*” (Matt. 9:13) that Jesus’ invitation to the way of the cross reveals a truly revolutionary and saving love. God loves us because we are all in need of the forgiving grace of the cross that recreates us for service to others.

This series will also make use of a theme present throughout Luther’s writings known as the “mask of God” (*larva Dei*). Luther used the term “mask” to indicate the way that God is hidden

in Christ, through the cross, the word and sacraments, and creation. Our humanity is the mask by which Christ dwells hidden in us by grace, accomplishing God's love through the works of our hands and voices.

The "mask of God" is also a significant counterpoint to the recent ways in which language about masks and masking have been polemicized, as if they were anything more than a medical means of keeping ourselves and others healthy and safe. Wearing a mask as a sign of concern for others, might be said to be the way in which God dwells hidden in us, revealing God's compassion and love by freeing us for service to our neighbor.

Our experience of Christ is always mediated through something or someone, such as the word, the sacraments and my neighbor. This is the radical purpose of God's revelation in hiddenness. Faith needs an object, and that object is Christ as contained in God's word. Christ holds, indeed binds, our faith closely to God's promises. Luther often quoted Hebrews 11:1 "Faith is the evidence of things not seen" in which God's hiddenness and masks mediate and reveal God's care and grace toward humanity. Faith is evidence that below the mask of our human condition, God is with us.

Luther expressed this in the following way,

One thing is sure: we cannot pin our hope on anything that we are, think, say or do...Nor can our satisfaction be uncertain, for it consists not of the dubious sinful works which we do but of the sufferings and blood of the innocent Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (*Smalcald Articles 3:3:36-37*).

Everything depends upon Christ and God's promises hidden and revealed to us in Christ. This is the hope of faith: believing in the promise that God is hidden and revealed in the cross, word, sacraments, words of forgiveness, creation, and in my neighbor.

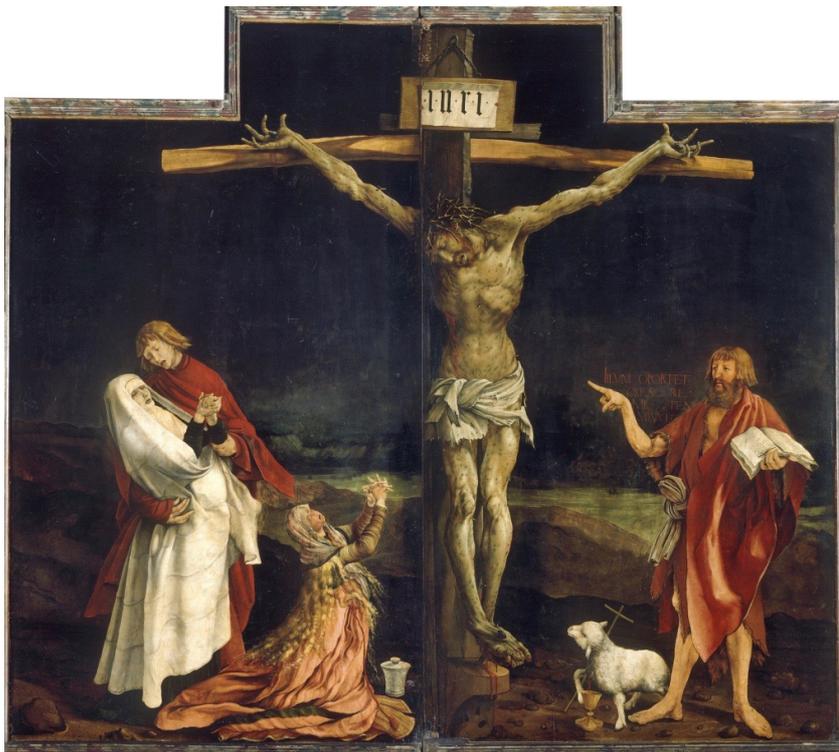
### **Week 1: "Crucifixion"** (*Isenheim Altarpiece* c. 1512-1516) by Matthias Grünewald

Matthias Grünewald (c. 1470-1528) was a German Renaissance painter who worked in a late medieval style, rather than in the emerging classical style of the period in which he lived. Of his works, only ten paintings and thirty-five drawings survive, the most famous of which is the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, of which "Crucifixion" is the center panel. In addition, three other paintings by Grünewald of the crucifixion survive, each slightly different yet revealing the suffering of Christ on the cross.

Details of Grünewald's life are sparse, but it appears that he was court artist of Uriel von Gemmingen, Archbishop of Mainz, and also worked for his successor Albert of Brandenburg. However, for reasons that are unknown, Grünewald's works became attributed to those of Albrecht Dürer, and until his rediscovery in the nineteenth century, Grünewald and his works fell into obscurity.

Grünewald's "Crucifixion" paintings are among the most poignant and graphic renderings of the Jesus' crucifixion in Christian art. The *Isenheim Altarpiece* "Crucifixion" is the most fully developed of these paintings. In this painting, John the Baptist stands to the right of the cross pointing to Christ, with the Latin words above him, "*He must increase, but I must decrease*" (John 3:30 from the Vulgate). John's presence at the cross in this painting is purely symbolic, because John announced the coming of Jesus, pointing to him as the one who gives eternal life (John 3:36). The lamb depicted next to the cross reveals what is hidden in the suffering of the cross, and is to be understood through what John said upon seeing Jesus, "*Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*" (John 1:29).

Grünewald made no attempt to beautify Jesus and his suffering on the cross. Jesus is shown in graphic suffering, emaciated, and with the marks of scourging over his body. His hands, feet and face are contorted with suffering. Because the *Isenheim Altarpiece* was originally painted for the Monastery of St. Anthony near Colmar France, it is also thought that this painting was meant to offer consolation to the sick cared for by the monastery, many of whom suffered from skin diseases that resulted in sores over the entire body. In addition, this period was also one of the plague, and the sores reveal Christ bearing the suffering of those who died of the plague. Like the words of Isaiah 53:4-6, “*Surely he has borne our grief and carried our sorrows...and by his stripes we are healed,*” Jesus is revealed as the Suffering Servant who, by dwelling in our humanity, heals our deepest human afflictions.



To the left of Jesus are the women at the cross and the disciple to whom Jesus said, “*Woman, behold your son!*” (John 19:26). The moment that Grünewald has captured follows Jesus’ words, “*It is finished;*” and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit” (John 19:30).

It is highly doubtful that Luther ever saw this painting, as Luther only made one trip outside of Germany to Rome in 1510 on behalf of his

monastery and the Augustine Order. Yet Grünewald’s “Crucifixion” shares Luther’s theology of the cross in which God is hidden and revealed in Jesus, the Suffering Servant. By not flinching at the utter starkness of human death, Grünewald has composed “a visual way of the cross” that points to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

There is an enduring relevance to this late medieval painting for our world today. We are people who are suffering under the weight of a global pandemic and the stark reality of nearly 4.6 million deaths around the world. The hope of the gospel, as hidden and revealed in the cross, is of Jesus who suffers in our humanity for the forgiveness and healing of the world.

John’s words, “*He must increase, but I must decrease,*” reveal our incarnational response. When Jesus calls us to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him, he is inviting us to die to ourselves so that as we decrease, he will increase in our lives. To journey on the way of the cross isn’t about increasing in my own stature, but rather it is about Jesus increasing within me. Hidden in faith, Jesus is revealed in the ways each of us love and serve our neighbor. Amen.