

**Sunday, February 26, 2017 – Transfiguration of the Lord**  
**Preacher: Rev. Douglas J. Brouwer**  
**Sermon Title: "What Jesus Does - the Doctrine of Atonement"**  
**Scripture Reading: Matthew 17:1-9**

(The other reading for the day is 1 Peter 1:16-21)

Note: We are well along now in our sermon series about what Christians believe. Last week Sam led us in a reflection on who Jesus is, and this week the topic is what Jesus does. Since the day on the church calendar is Transfiguration Sunday, we have an excellent opportunity to see clearly the second person of the Trinity who is both fully human and fully divine at the same time.

1. The story of the Transfiguration occurs in all three Synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), and it seems to fall about midway in Jesus' ministry, the same place in each gospel. The question is probably unanswerable, but still worthy of reflection: Why did this event occur? Or, put another way: What did it accomplish? What did Jesus want the disciples to see? And did they see it?

2. The Transfiguration is really a further look at who Jesus is, and so we must look closely at the second reading to begin our reflection on what Jesus does. The work Jesus came to do is generally referred to as the atonement. The pastor of my childhood church liked to say that the word contains its own definition ... At - One - Ment. In other words, in the atonement Jesus brought us back into relationship with God. We became "at one" again.

3. You might be interested to know that this work of atonement has been attracting a lot of attention by scholars and preachers in the last 10-20 years. Believers have been asking (all over again) why Jesus had to die. Take a few moments to answer that question for yourself ... before I reveal a few of the concerns.

4. Okay, here we go: the concerns that have been raised in recent years have to do with a violent God requiring justice (for our sin) through the unimaginably horrible death of his son. Feminist scholars have pointed out some problems with the image of an angry father. And before you dismiss these concerns too quickly, please acknowledge that Jesus' death on the cross was particularly brutal and humiliating. Was it necessary?

5. American preacher Fleming Rutledge has written a wonderful book called *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ*, which won the 2016 Book of the Year Award from Christianity Today. The fact that this book was written at all, the fact that it is a best seller in Christian circles, the fact that it won such a prestigious award is all evidence that the questions surrounding Jesus' death are still very much alive. Not the fact that he died, but how he was killed, the manner of it, the cruelty. Rutledge argues, among other things, that the decision to allow Jesus to die was made within the Trinity. In other words, this was no vengeful father, taking out his anger on the son. God made this decision within himself and solemnly carried it out. Have you ever considered life within the Trinity and how (within the perfect fellowship they enjoy) a decision like this could be made?

6. See the reference in 1 Peter to the "blood of Christ." Rutledge makes the observation that references to "the blood of Christ" occur three times as often in the New Testament as "the death of Christ." In other words, as much as we might like to avoid references to the blood (and many artists have totally eliminated it), the New Testament continues to remind us what a bloody ordeal Jesus' death really was. I can't repeat all of her argument here, but she makes the case that blood in the ancient world was a life force. And so, when it is "poured out," it is life itself that is being offered up (for us). The apostle Paul refers to a libation that is poured. We are literally invited to think of a cup that is emptied.

7. In another place, Paul calls Jesus' death (his crucifixion) a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks. Rutledge says that most Christians are Jews on Sunday and Greeks the rest of the week. What she means is that we like inspiration on Sunday (worship that inspires us and makes us feel good), and we like reason, objectivity, science, etc. the rest of the week. And yet, the cross of Christ defies both. The cross is a victory, yes, but not the shallow victory that gives us a warm feeling. And there is no language that totally explains it. New Testament images of the courtroom, for example, are only images and cannot fully explain what was accomplished for us. When you think about the cross and the circumstances of Jesus' death, what thoughts and feelings surface within you? (Maybe there is a reason that we sing Good Friday hymns. There is no other way to adequately explain what happened on the cross and why.)