

How are you at making decisions? Would people call you decisive? Or are you one who needs lots of time and lots of information to process? While I am normally a fairly decisive person, there is a tool invented in 1936 that fascinates me. It's called a decision tree. Decision trees look like a spider web, and at every intersection is a question you must answer and, depending on how you answer it, it takes you to a different part of the chart. Once you answer all the questions, you will have your decision.

This morning we are all going to be looking at a decision tree together, but this one isn't like most. You see, this is a decision tree established by God well before the year 1936. This decision tree has only two lines, lines in the shape of a cross, and at the intersection of those two lines is a man named Jesus. As we saw last week and will see again today, he lived a life of unwavering dedication to the mission his Father sent him on, unwavering dedication that will continue until his death, and unwavering dedication so compelling that each and every person who witnessed it was forced to make a decision about who Jesus is and what he will mean to their life. It is the same decision we are presented with ourselves.

Jesus remained unwavering despite great suffering. The decision he made to pursue the Father's will while in the Garden of Gethsemane is now being realized. He has been found guilty through a phony trial, assaulted and mocked along the way, and now heads to his ultimate destination, the cross.

[Luke 23:32-38] ³² Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. ³³ And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴ And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments. ³⁵ And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" ³⁶ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine ³⁷ and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" ³⁸ There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

The whole of Jesus' ministry culminates here at a place called The Skull, or Golgotha. There are two sites that have been identified as the place where Jesus was crucified. One is the traditional location where the Church of the Holy Sepulcher sits. The other is in a scenic, serene garden area that was identified long after because of the way a rock formation looked. This is where the will of man and will of God actually align, though for vastly different reasons. One party desires to eliminate Jesus. The other party desires to eliminate sin and death.

It is also here where Jesus' suffering would reach its climax, though you would not be able to tell based on Jesus' reaction. After all he has been through and all he will endure in this moment, he stays determined to finish the work the Father sent him to accomplish.

He is encircled by various groups and attitudes toward him, none of them positive. For some he is a debacle, for some a spectacle, and for others an obstacle. For the Roman soldiers, he is a debacle, another Jew who got out of line and is paying the price. His life is worth far less than the clothes on his back. For the crowd, he is a spectacle. Like rubberneckers drawn to the scene of an accident, they want to see how this ends for the one they were demanding be crucified. And

for the rulers, he is an obstacle. The religious leaders of Israel have no time and business for a young rabbi who confronts them, calls out their self-righteousness, and gets in the way of the system they have built and are the beneficiaries of.

We might look at these people and shake our heads, but do we ever consider Jesus in similar ways? We can sometimes be more focused on what Jesus can give us instead of who, which is himself. We may, at times, see Jesus as this fascinating guy “out there” but not take time to listen to and observe what he has told us. And, maybe most regularly, we see Jesus as getting in the way of our agenda, messing up our system.

I believe we would be far less likely to go down those paths if we regularly consider all he is going through in this moment. Crucifixion is the most dehumanizing form of capital punishment. He is crucified between two criminals, as a criminal, even though he is innocent. His clothes are gambled over, which was customary at crucifixions, intended as the final humiliation as it leaves him nearly naked as he hangs there. And he is scoffed or mocked incessantly (literally “to turn up one’s nose”), throwing his claims of being the Son of God back in his face in order to declare him impotent. They will all be very surprised in three days.

But in the midst of all this pain, all this suffering, all this humiliation, Jesus has his mind and heart set on one thing and one thing only: **forgiveness**. We should be in awe that Jesus would have compassion on these people and call upon the Father to continue his plan of offering forgiveness to them through him. Think about how difficult forgiveness can be. Anybody rear-ended in their car this week? I was. Thankfully I had a few seconds to gather myself as I pulled into a parking lot to engage this other driver. That’s a minor example that pales in comparison to what some of you have gone through, the pain caused by someone else and, perhaps, the most difficult choice you ever had to make was to forgive them. And all of that pales in comparison to what Jesus went through.

He had endured false accusations, physical torture, public humiliation, incessant mocking and, very soon, death on a cross to pay for the sin of the world. But he is unwavering in his mission to reconcile man back to God, and he did so through the most horrific of circumstances. But why did he do it? We know he is committed to the Father’s will. And he is also committed to us.

[Romans 5:8] ⁸ but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

You and I may not have been on the scene that day in Jerusalem, but we are just as responsible for what happened. Jesus endured all of this to love and honor his Father and to love and save us. I want to invite you to celebrate Good Friday with us. Without the empty tomb, there would be no new life in Christ. And without the cross, there would be no satisfaction of God’s justice, and forgiveness would be impossible. Remember, Jesus asked if there was any other way, and the answer was “no”. We will gather for a time to reflect on the glory of the cross and worship our Savior and offer our thanksgiving. It will be a time to show our love for him in response to the love he showed for us by dying for us.

Jesus remained unwavering due to great trust. Jesus was able to endure because of his love for the Father and faith in him.

[Luke 23:44-46] ⁴⁴ It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, ⁴⁵ while the sun's light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶ Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last.

Jesus was first crucified in the third hour, around 9:00 AM. Between the sixth and ninth hour, around 12:00-3:00, Luke tells us of two phenomena that communicate the magnitude of what is occurring. Darkness filled the land. Jesus told the arresting mob that this was their hour and darkness would reign. The innocent Son of God was being crucified, and the dark skies were confirmation that this was happening. But something else significant happens. The temple had always been central place to worship God and the location of the sacrificial system. The curtain of the temple tearing in two was a sign that something was changing. The sacrifice of bulls and goats would no longer be necessary because the sacrifice of the Lamb of God was occurring. Jesus' unwavering meant you and I would worship in a new way.

Finally, at 3:00, three years after he began his public ministry, and less than 24 hours after he was arrested in the Garden, Jesus' life ended with a shout as he cried out "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." Eight words that proclaim three magnificent truths: 1) **A declaration of completion.** He had completed the work the Father had sent him to accomplish. He did not waver. 2) **A declaration of control.** Luke tells us he called out with a loud voice. Jesus died with strength left in him. As he told his disciples in John 10, he lays down his life for his sheep. No one takes it from him. This is a decision tree for Jesus too, and it was his decision to be on it to give his life for us. 3) **A declaration of confidence.** He had done everything the Father had asked of him, and this last prayer of trust was an expression of submission to the Father's will and a hopeful request that he would care for and deliver him (which he would three days later).

It was the grand finale of a lifetime lived in perfect obedience to the Father, based on complete trust in the Father, and given to the glory of the Father. With this hope in the Father, Jesus dies. Just like God worked for six days and then rested, Jesus hung on a cross for six hours, and then rested. It was finished.

As we follow Jesus' command to pick up and carry our own cross, we must realize it is a heavy burden and decide if we will try to bear it alone. You see, if we're not anchored when the waves of suffering start lapping at us, we'll get blown off course. I saw a picture of what it's like to try to do it on your own. This week a Minnesota state trooper was working an accident scene in the middle of a blizzard. He was surrounded by turmoil and torment and was blown off course by a very strong wind and an icy road. He couldn't accomplish what he was sent to accomplish because he had no anchor. But ultimately, he got back to the jackknifed semi that he was sent to work around, got anchored, and finished the work he was sent to do. Our anchor is our Savior, and he is also our example. Jesus remained anchored to his Father and that was what allowed him to remain unwavering in completing the work he was sent to do.

Jesus' unwavering determination demands our decision. The way Jesus endured all of this suffering, including being hung from a tree, and did not rage but instead asked that God forgive them requires that we all make a decision about him.

[Luke 23:39-43] ³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” ⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?” ⁴¹ And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” ⁴² And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” ⁴³ And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Before he dies, Jesus has a significant interaction with the two criminals crucified with him. Their responses illustrate the decision each of us must make about Jesus. The first criminal echoes the same taunts as the rest. He says, “if you are the Christ, save yourself”. But he adds something the rest have not: “and us!” At least he knows that if Jesus is the Christ, he could save him as well. The problem is that he doesn’t understand what he truly needs to be saved from. He thinks his biggest problem is the cross he’s hanging from. He doesn’t realize that his legal condition is but a picture of his spiritual condition, and it’s the same spiritual condition each and every one of us are born into.

The second criminal rebukes him. He asks him “Do you not fear God?” The question is essential because they are both about to come face-to-face with him, as we all will one day. The question could also be viewed as an invitation. Though the first criminal seemed hardened towards Jesus, the gospels of Matthew and Mark tell us the second one started that way as well. But something changed as he hung there next to Jesus, seemingly compelled by his unwavering commitment, his compassion for others, and his focus on forgiveness. So his heart was changed in that moment, and he desired the other criminal’s heart be changed too. Next week you have an opportunity to invite someone to our Easter services. You don’t need to rebuke them. You can just invite them. I’m going first. I’ll be inviting the young lady who rear-ended me this week. I have heard a little of her story, grown fond of her, and will ask her if she’d like to join us. Who in your life can you invite with the hopes that they may come to the same conclusion as the second criminal?

The second criminal ultimately understood there was something on the other side of his own cross, and the man hanging next to him had control over what that would be. **The first criminal crucified with Jesus was worried about getting down. The second criminal was worried about getting home.** He understood Jesus is not a get out of jail free card. He is a get out of hell free card, and his work upon the cross is what made that possible. Jesus receives and answers the confession of the second criminal. He says, “I am guilty.” But through the cross Jesus says, “I have removed your guilt from you, as far as the east is from the west.” The criminal says, “I am condemned.” Jesus says, “there is no condemnation for those who are in Jesus.” The criminal says, “I don’t have anything to pay with.” Jesus says, “I’ve paid it all.” The criminal says, “Remember me.” Jesus says, “I could never forget.” The criminal says, “I want to be with you.” Through the cross Jesus says, “This is the way home.”

All three of them died that day, but only two of them died in peace. The first criminal made the decision to reject Jesus, despite all that he saw and heard. The second recognized who Jesus is, recognized his own guilt, and made a confession of faith that was received and honored by Jesus.

Just like Jesus knew he was going to die and placed all his trust in the Father, so too does the second criminal by placing his hope and trust in Jesus.

And so that brings us to the decision each of us must make. It's the same decision presented to the criminals that day, and it's all about the man who hung between them. The second criminal gives us the confession we must make to come into a saving relationship with Jesus, and it's the confession of dependence we must make each day if we are to live an unwavering life for God. If you have wavered in this decision about Jesus, I encourage you to be decisive today, confess your guilt, and ask Jesus to take on that guilt at the cross so that you, like the criminal, can be with him forever.