**Maltese Cross**

Based on [James 2:14-26](http://biblia.com/books/esv/Jas2.14-26)

Preached on March 6, 2013

Midweek Lent 3

By Pastor Nathan Fuehrer

The season of lent is a journey to the cross. Lent ends on the cross, and Easter begins in its wake. It’s fitting, then, that during our midweek Lenten services this year, our theme each week will be a different cross. We don’t know the exact shape of Jesus’ own cross, some are more likely candidates than others. But for our purposes, we will look at nine different crosses and what they represent for the Christian life.

So far we've looked at the *Tau,*  *Saltire and Anchor* crosses. In the Tau Cross, we were reminded of God’s command in the book of Ezekiel to make a Tau on the foreheads of the repentant. In the *Saltire Cross*, we are reminded of the humility of St. Andrew who was crucified on it. And the Anchor Cross stood as a mixed symbol to early Christians--linking Jesus' own cross to the stability that an anchor brings a ship in the midst of a storm.

Today we turn our eyes to the Maltese Cross. If any of you remember the old Humphrey Bogart movie, the Maltese Falcon, you'll know that Maltese means having to do with the island of Malta.

In fact, the cross symbol associated with the Knights Templar of Malta and therefore by extension with the island of Malta in the Mediterranean sea. The cross is eight-pointed and has the form of four "V"-shaped elements joined together at their tips, so that each arm has two points. Its design is based on crosses used since the First Crusade.

It has been called the "Regeneration Cross" because it's eight points symbolize the eight beatitudes or "blessings" that describe the life of the regenerate Christian. "**Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, those who hunger and thirst, the merciful, the pure in heart. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."**

The Maltese Cross is the Regeneration Cross, and Regeneration literally means, "born again". Jesus said to Nicodemus, **"Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born of Water and the Spirit, he cannot ender the kingdom of God...You must be born again."** Water and Spirit were together at Jesus' own Baptism, as the bible says **"And when Jesus came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove."** Jesus recieved the Spirit in his baptism, and so do we. And it was after Jesus own regeneration that he was driven out by the spirit to the wilderness to be tested. And it was after his baptism that he began preaching the gospel and healing people. After he received the Spirit, he went to work.

Not all Christians believe in Baptismal regeneration. I heard a story once about a pastor who was preaching about the wonderful gift of baptism, and the new birth of water and spirit. A couple of guys came up to him after the service and said that "**You're born again by the spirit only after a person makes a personal decision for Jesus Christ**." Water has nothing to do with it. They said they knew plenty of people who were baptized and are rascals.

The first thing to remember tonight is not to let anyone tell you that baptism is just a nice ceremony that doesn't do anything. As a matter of fact, I happen to know enough people who have "made a decision for Christ" and turn out to be rascals. Maybe you remember televangelist Jim Bakker; he and his wife Tammy Faye made a haul of money by telling people to make a decision for Jesus and "sow your seed", (meaning send money).

He was all about the "Altar Call," the personal decision for Jesus. Later he resigned from the ministry because of a sex scandal; after that he was imprisoned for accounting fraud. He had made a public decision for Jesus...his whole ministry was based on it, and yet it doesn't *look like* he was ever "born again." Looks like he was a rascal. Now this is not to say that rascals can't repent and be saved. What it does show, however, is that a personal decision to accept Jesus into your heart is no more of a guarantee of holiness than water. The difference is that the water of baptism comes with a promise of regeneration.

Just because you're born again doesn't mean you can't die again. There are plenty who have received the spirit in Baptism, only to drive him away by giving in to idolatry, and mammon, and becoming ensnared by the lures and temptations of the world.

We had a reading tonight from the book of James, Jesus' brother. James wrote his letter to Christians who were beginning to forget how God wants His reborn people to live. They were grumbling when confronted by trials and temptations, so much so that their commitment was wavering. They were becoming cliquish, quick with the tongue, proud, envious, and ambitious. They were overly impressed by the rich and influential, perhaps thinking that these people could further the church's cause more than the poor. There is a hint that the Christians to whom James writes looked on these sins as part of the exercise of "true religion." And James compares their situation to that of a corpse: "**As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead**."

In the olden days, maybe some of you remember the olden days...in the olden days one of the ways you might check to see if someone was really dead was to put a mirror under their nose, see if it would fog up. God formed Adam from the dust, breathed into his nostrils and gave him life. James says, **"Just as the body without the spirit, without "breath" is dead, so faith without works is dead."**

The Maltese Cross reminds us that rebirth shows signs of life, and that these signs of life aren't what we might think they are. Signs of life are found in those who are poor in spirit, who mourn, the meek, the hungry...the merciful not the powerful; the peacemakers not the warmongers; the persecuted not the people-pleasers. Those who are born again show signs of life. We remember these blessings because they are a way to hold a mirror under our own nose and the nose of others and see the spirit at work where He promises to be.

And yet, even with our new birth, our old sinful self still pops up, making us think we are weak when we should be strong, and strong when we should be weak. We still rebel against God, and the good we want to do we fail to do.

When that happens don't remember *your* decision to amend your life...you've made too many bad decisions already in your life, all of us have...and if you continue to trust yourself, you will become disillusioned. Don't remember your decision for Jesus, but remember Jesus' decision for you. That he built his church, not aon a bunch of committed people, but on a bunch of promises, and one of those is regeneration, rebirth by Water and the Spirit and the promise is especially there for you to remember when you fail. Where we are faithless, He remains faithful. When you fall, you may be reminded by the Maltese cross that you are blessed eight-fold, because God raises up the fallen.