**The Tau Cross**

Based on [Ezekiel 9:4](http://biblia.com/books/esv/Eze9) and [Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21](http://biblia.com/books/esv/Mt6)

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Ash Wednesday

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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.

Tonight we take a look at the Tau Cross. It is a cross in the shape of a capital “T”. It is considered the cross of *prophecy*. It is said to be the shape of the cross that Moses used when he raised the bronze serpent. The Israelites are said to have drawn the Tau Cross in Blood over their doorposts on Passover night.

In the OT times, the Prophet Ezekiel spoke to God’s people while they were committing idolatry, which he called an abomination. He spoke a prophesy, that the glory of the lord spoke to an angel and said, “**Pass through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a *mark* on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it” (9:4).** That’s a translation. Your bible at home says put a “mark” on the foreheads, but what it really says is “***make a Tau***” which is the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. And, given the time in which Ezekiel was writing, the Tau was written in the shape of a cross.

So the mark you received on your forehead tonight is not some meaningless tradition. In Ezekiel’s day, those who sigh and groan over the idolatry happening in God’s house received the mark of Tau on their foreheads, were spared from death, while the others were destroyed. The mark did not mean that they were less sinful than others, nor was it supposed to be a badge of honour. In fact, the mark was, itself a sign of guilt. It was a sign for those who knew they were guilty of abominations against God and were sorrowful for it. The cross on their forehead was to mark those who repented. Lent is a season of repentance, and repentance is simply the condition of knowing that you are a sinner in need of a Saviour.

Jesus says some amazing words in the Gospel lesson for Ash Wednesday, and they have to do with repentance. He says, “**Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father in heaven**.” Why would he say that? Aren’t we, as Christians, supposed to lead by example? Aren’t we supposed to show others how Christians act in righteousness. Doesn’t Matthew say, a chapter earlier, “**Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven**?” What a mixed message*. Don’t show off your righteousness because you will have no reward* and yet, *show off your righteousness so that others will praise God.*

Well the problem, ladies and gentlemen, is not the righteousness, it’s the practicing of righteousness that is deadly. Martin Luther once said that “**The law of God, the greatest teaching of life, cannot advance man on his way to righteousness, but rather hinders him**.” In other words practicing the 10 commandments, for instance, cannot make you righteous. In fact, they threaten your salvation…not as though they are crimes or anything, but because just practicing them doesn’t require a repentant heart, and can in fact, hide a person from their sinfulness.

The Tau cross is the cross of prophesy, and on this Ash Wednesday, the Tau cross reminds us of a certain type of prophesy…a curse. The Tau cross ought to remind us that we are under a curse. The Tau cross--as it’s spoken of in Ezekiel--reminds us that we are marked men and women, and no matter how righteous we look on the outside, it doesn’t change the fact that we stand naked before God. That if we “put on righteousness” by works, we will refuse Christ’s garment, because we’ll foolishly believe we are already covered in righteous attire.

You may remember that the second sin recorded in scripture is murder, and not just any murder, but the jealous murder of a brother. Cain murdered his brother Abel from envy, the same reason the Jews murdered Jesus with the cross. Afterward, Cain was cursed to be a failure and a fugitive. Cain confessed that his punishment was more than he could bear, and so God gave him a mark. We don’t know where God placed the mark, but the forehead seems likely, because it was a mark that was to be plainly seen. The mark, whatever it was, had a double purpose. That mark was a constant reminder to Cain that he murdered his brother in cold blood, and every time he looked at that mark he would remember, so that no matter how much he would practice righteousness, how many medals of service and outstanding achievement awards he would receive, that mark would remain, by his own works he could never erase what he had done; by his own righteousness, he could never cover up the curse of sin.

But that mark of his sin was also the mark of his salvation. When god cursed Cain to wander the earth, Cain was terrified that others would know what he had done and kill him. Then the Lord said to Cain, “**Not so! If anyone kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.” And the Lord put a mark on Cain, lest any who found him should attack him.”** That mark of shame actually saved Cains life.I like to think that that mark was a cross. Not only because two crossing lines is one of the easiest of all marks to make---such a mark is often used still today to set things apart or designate them in some way special or different. “X marks the spot.”--In Cain's case, maybe *Tau* marked the spot. I think the mark of Cain was a Tau cross.

Whether the mark of Cain, or the mark of Tau in Ezekiel or the cross of Jesus Christ is the same Tau Cross you see on the screen tonight, I don’t know. But I do know that wherever you see a cross, you should remember that you have been marked with it, that you carry it, not proudly, that it is both a curse and a blessing, it kills and saves, and the prophesy of eternal life will come to pass, but until that hour, we cling with repentant joy to the cross.