In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

On this Holy Cross Sunday, let me begin with a verse from our Epistle Lesson. Saint Paul is writing to the Corinthians about the strange, disciplined “power of God” – a power that involves the cross:

18 For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (1 Corinthians 1:18, RSV)

There is a moving passage in Volume I of Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics in which Barth compares the power of the cross to the little sling shot that young David used against Goliath.¹ He forsook the royal armor of King Saul and relied simply upon his little sling shot and five smooth stones.

Imagine the lad. He stands before King Saul. All the soldiers and all the king’s men have wilted before the taunts and challenges of Goliath. No one wants to fight him. “We only have one life,” we can hear them saying. “It would be madness to fight against that giant. The man blocks out the sun, he is so big and tall! Why, we could not even carry his armor, it is so heavy. We do not mean to squander our lives. We have wives and children back home to take care of.” We can imagine their arguments. They are perfectly reasonable. Yet, as they go on with their rational arguments, there stands Goliath, defying Israel and Israel’s God, the very Maker of heaven and earth, including yon giant, Goliath. So, the soldiers demur. They decline to fight. They mean to live to fight another day.

But here stands the lad, David, offering himself to King Saul to fight for Israel:

And David said to Saul, Let no man’s heart fail because of him; thy servant will go and fight with this Philistine. (1 Samuel 17:32, KJV)

The king tries to talk the boy out of it:

And Saul said to David, Thou art not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him: for thou art but a youth, and he a man of war from his youth. (1 Samuel 17:33, KJV)

¹ Barth, Church Dogmatics I, 2, p. 678. The Freedom of the Word.
But David calmly explains to the king that in his life as a shepherd boy, he has triumphed over lion and bear and he will triumph over Goliath too:

David said moreover, The LORD that delivered me out of the paw of the lion, and out of the paw of the bear, he will deliver me out of the hand of this Philistine. (1 Samuel 17:37, KJV)

So, the King gives his consent and wishes David well:

And Saul said unto David, Go, and the LORD be with thee. (1 Samuel 17:37, KJV)

But before David goes, there is this matter of the royal armor. The king imagines that if you are going to face a giant, you need all the help you can get. So, he tries to load the lad down with armor and weapon:

38 Then Saul clothed David with his armor; he put a helmet of bronze on his head, and clothed him with a coat of mail.
39 And David girded his sword over his armor, and he tried in vain to go, for he was not used to them. Then David said to Saul, “I cannot go with these; for I am not used to them.” And David put them off. (1 Samuel 17:38-39, RSV)

David prefers his own ways. He leaves the armor behind, drops the royal sword, and goes out to face the giant with his slingshot and some stones he had gathered out of the brook and placed in his shepherd’s bag. With these simple weapons, he defeats the giant. He never wavers, but presses on until the deed is entirely done.

**The way of the cross**

It seems to me that David’s putting off the royal armor and sword and going forward with his little slingshot is an illustration for us of what Saint Paul praises as the way of the cross. Our slingshot in this world is the way of the cross. It is our method, our principle as we follow our crucified Lord. Saint Paul holds our heart to this heat, as if it were a firebrand we would be glad to escape. The apostle emphasizes that the death of Jesus on a cross is not an extraneous part of the story, but goes to the heart of our faith. And so we hear his great words in today’s Epistle Lesson:

22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, 23 but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and
Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Corinthians 1:22-24, RSV)

The “way of the cross” means that there is a kind of constraint that Christians place upon themselves in the conduct of their lives. It is akin to that part of Just War Theory that concerns “right conduct in war” (jus in bello). The idea of the Just War Doctrine is that not even war is so lawless that it can forget the laws of humanity. Acts of war, for example, should be aimed toward enemy combatants, for example, and not toward non-combatants. Cities that include no military targets are not to be bombed. Captured soldiers are not to be starved or tortured. Shipwrecked sailors, or helpless soldiers dangling from parachutes in trees are not to be shot. And there must be due proportionality between the suffering inflicted on civilians and civilian property and the military necessity of the battle. Such disciplines are self-imposed constraints on the conduct of war, lest we forget the humanity of the enemy and lest we lose our own humanity along the way.

**The just ways of Jesus**

Likewise, the way of the cross is a kind of discipline Christians are called to lay upon themselves that they might be true to Christ and to his love of humanity. Consider the twelve legion of angels, for example. When the end was fast approaching for Jesus, when his death was almost within sight, Jesus well knew that he could have rescued himself by summoning the angels:

> Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? (Matthew 26:53, RSV)

But he did not do it. He declined to wage his war against sin, death, and the devil that way. Instead, he fought with the weapons that are available to you and me too. He fought by standing up for the truth, for asking of humanity that they be true men and women, and by suffering their blows if that is what they chose to lay on him.

So, the matter of the angels is interesting, but so is the matter of Pilate, the Roman governor in whose hands Jesus lay. Just as Jesus could have summoned the angels, so he could have arranged his own escape by way of an inner command to Pilate to set him free. Of his own judgment, Pilate had concluded that Jesus was innocent. It would not have taken much more to have fortified the man to release Jesus. But Jesus, who could calm the storm on a raging sea, and who could have calmed and organized rightly the thinking of Pilate, let the man go. And so Pilate condemned Jesus to death, and Jesus lived with the choice.

Indeed, in Dostoyevsky’s great novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, this is why the Grand Inquisitor condemned Jesus to be burned at the stake. The old man gave such a cruel judgment because he said that he loved humanity. The Grand
Inquisitor was convinced that Jesus held humanity up to too high a standard, that if Jesus, for example, had been willing to turn stones into bread, it would have been so much easier for humanity to have followed Jesus. But Jesus refused to buy the loyalty of humanity with bread, but required of them that they be free people of love. And the Grand Inquisitor was convinced that this was too much. He did not believe that we are capable of the way of the cross. He did not believe that we are capable of nobility and freedom in our conduct toward others.

But that is what Jesus asks of his disciples:

Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. (Matthew 16:24, KJV)

Jesus believes that we are capable of nobility. He believes that we are capable of blessing when we are cursed, of not kicking our enemy when our enemy is down or dangling by a parachute in some tree. Jesus believes that we can pray for our enemies and forgive seven-times-seventy times. He believes that we can take up our cross and follow him.

And then, wonder of wonders, he believes we can win that way!

For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. (Matthew 16:25, KJV)

Just as the shepherd boy could defeat the mighty giant with a mere slingshot, so we can help make this world a better place and live a life more worthy of eternity by taking upon ourselves the constraints of the cross.

Altogether, young David’s overcoming of the mighty giant by the little slingshot and the Christian’s victory by way of the cross puts me in mind of that defiant verse in Luther’s hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”—the verse about how “one little word” is sufficient to defeat the devil:

Let this world’s tyrant rage;
in battle we’ll engage!
His might is doomed to fail;
God’s judgment must prevail!
One little word subdues him. (LBW 229, verse 3)

**John 3:16**

Ah, but what is that “one little word” that subdues the devil, indeed will conquer the whole world in the end? Let’s try this, John 3:16, from today’s Gospel Lesson:
For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Let’s bring this sermon to an end by admiring this golden verse, John 3:16. Let me begin with a passage from Martin Luther’s commentary on it. This is characteristic Martin Luther, with his plain speaking and his sense of wonder and awe before the gospel:

That there should be a God and that he should love the world and grudge it no good thing, passes all our reason, mind, comprehension and skill. If I were God, who knows the world inside out, of what sort it is, I should have wished it hell fire, and done it. That is what I should have done. But what does God? Instead of his wrath which the world has well deserved, he has loved the world, and in such surpassing and incomprehensible wise, that he gives his only Son to the world, his bitterest enemies. I have no rhetoric or eloquence to encompass this [fact] or adequately to draw out these [magnificent figures]. Were it not more than enough that God had bidden the world good morrow? But He goes further and loves the world,…the image of all that is most hostile and unholy. That is what the world is in very truth. A stall full of wicked and shameless people, who misuse most shamefully all the creatures of God, blaspheming God and ascribing all their ills to him. And it is these shameful folk that God loves. That is a love transcending all love. Verily he must be a good God, and His love must be a great, inconceivable fire, much greater than the fire which Moses saw in the bush, yea much greater than the fire of hell. Who would despair, for that God is thus minded towards the world? It is too high and above my skill, I cannot amplify nor adequately represent it as it is in fact and in verity” (Luther, Pred. üb. Jn. 3:16-21, 1532, E.A.4,124f., quoted in Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics I, 2, page 380).

The love of God begins with this fact: that he gives … he gives not a trifle, nor even silver and gold, but his own dear Son.

And the love of God continues with this second fact: that this Son likewise gives. He went about doing good. He gave of us his time and his abilities and of his largeness of heart, so that not even lepers nor notorious sinners were beyond his giving. And in the end, though he did not want to die, he gave his life too, in our place, as our Champion.
That was his slingshot. Jesus was this world Champion, who fought the greatest of our enemies — even sin, death, and the devil — not with royal armor, helmet and sword, but with the cross.

And the love of God continues even now with this third fact: that those of us who bear the name of Christ and are trying to walk in his ways and with his Spirit — I mean you and me — that we should fight on on behalf of the world using simply the slingshot, using simply the way of the cross that our Lord followed. That is, we try to do good in this world after the manner of Jesus. We know that there are giants out there and that Christians can fail and even die. But we simply press on, day by day, with our little slingshot, trying to present this world with an image of our Saviour, and trusting the matter to him and to his resurrection, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.