

Good Friday Sermon Year A 2017

Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12

Psalms 22

Hebrews 10:16-25

John 18:1 – 19:42

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So the difficult day has arrived, the day we call Good Friday. From the earliest days, the church identified and gathered together in somber reflection on this particular Friday. Yet, to our ears, the name seems inappropriate, Good Friday. It is unclear exactly how the title “good” became associated with today, but that has not stopped a host of theories from arising. Some say it is called good because Christians find something good in it as the anniversary of Jesus dying for our sins. While some Christians understand it this way, this is not the origin.

Some say that it comes from God’s Friday in much the same way that “Goodbye” was originally the longer phrase, “God be with you.” But there is no linguistic connection here between God and Good, despite what we might think.

The theory that has the most linguistic support derives from an antiquated meaning of the word, good. Long ago, “good” was used to mean “holy.” This is the theory held by language experts. So Holy Friday became Good Friday.

Churches in the West from earliest times have called this day, Good Friday. In the East, the Orthodox Church calls today, Great Friday. (Passion Friday in Russian. Sacred Friday in the Romance languages.) Good Friday, Great Friday, Holy Friday. Many names for a difficult day and yet our Lenten journey always brings us to this point and faithfully we have chosen to gather and reflect.

Today, we heard the story from the perspective of John’s gospel. John’s Gospel was the last one written. And it paints a unique picture of the final day of Jesus’ life. Unlike the synoptic accounts in Matthew, Mark and Luke the account portrays Jesus as seemingly in charge of events. Like all gospel writers, John is reporting on the stories that have been developed and retained in the memory of his faith community. So, his gospel reflects the Johannine community’s experience of the crucifixion. What they had come to believe and understand of the events on the day we call Good Friday.

We were taken through the events of this 24 hour period. We experienced Jesus' arrest, his questioning by religious leaders, his interrogation by Pilate, and his crucifixion and burial. We heard again the story that brings us to reflecting upon the magnitude of Jesus' sacrifice once offered so long ago. It is hard to sit with this harrowing story for long and we are tempted to live into the future. As post resurrection people we yearn to look ahead.

Yet this time together invites us to explore what could make this Friday good after all. Opening ourselves to this story of sacrifice opens us to the divine love that is always reaching into the world, bringing about the transformation that God is enacting.

Some aspects of John's account are troubling because of how they have been interpreted through time. John uses a phrase to describe the faithful Jewish residents of Jerusalem calling them, "The Jews." John is describing what has happened in John's community's experience of being separated from the synagogue. Scholars believe that initially, the stories of Jesus' life were told over and over in the context of worship in the synagogue. The first followers of Jesus were Jewish as was Jesus and the disciples. But over time a separation occurred. Jesus died around the year 31 of the Common Era and John's gospel was not written until between the years 90 and 100 CE. Just before this around the end of the ninth decade, a separation had occurred between the early Christian movement and the Jewish faithful. The Christian believers had been separated from the synagogue. They no longer consider themselves to be Jewish and they are no longer welcome in synagogue worship. John refers to the Jewish faithful as, "the Jews."

How are we to understand this? One way to look upon this might be to reflect upon the kinds of separations that have occurred in our own time. To consider the separations from our own churches over current issues: women's ordination, charismatic movement, 1979 BCP, Sexuality. With each of these changes some Episcopalians chose to walk another way. We may speak of them as the Charismatics or Anglicans still using the 1928 BCP or by some other term. While the term may not be endearing, it is not malevolent. We simply acknowledge that they have chosen to walk and remain true to another path. Our names are not pejorative. And we wish them no ill will or harm. If their sects don't flourish that might be ok with us, but we don't wish them harm.

But others reading John's gospel have taken the term "the Jews" in a derogatory or hateful manner and centuries of horrific actions have resulted. When we hear the phrase if you are like me, you cringe. But John was not writing in a hateful way. John was raised Jewish. He holds no lifelong disdain toward the Jewish faith. We must not mistake John's intent with his use of a phrase that has undergirded centuries of intolerance.

John is telling a story through his lens of experience. From the beginning of John's account, Jesus seems to be in charge. When Judas and a detachment of soldiers confronted Jesus and the disciples in the garden, it was Jesus who controlled the conversation. "Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, 'Whom are you looking for?' 'I am he.'" Jesus appears in control and he goes willingly.

Through this day Jesus appears in many ways **in control** refusing to resist what is happening. Our inclination perhaps is to hope that he will resist or strike out in some way. Peter and the disciples had this thought. It is our first thought too many times as well. Jesus quickly put a stop to such a response. "Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I to drink the cup that the Father has given me?" Jesus shows us that his perfect communion with the Father also includes perfect obedience to the Father. Jesus allowed himself to be arrested and bound. The events stream forward from the garden. Relentlessly forward.

Of all the power that Jesus could draw upon, he would not resort to the power of force. Jesus went along willingly and did not resist. He did not resist in the way that perhaps those worshippers who sang at his triumphant entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday might have hoped. Jesus will not crush the evil forces of the world in a traditional battle yielding death and destruction. Violence is not his way. Violence is not God's way, because violence is never ultimately effective. It is a lesson to be relearned in every generation.

Part of the meaning of this Good Friday is the way in which it answers despair and suffering. "The power of the cross as a symbol is that it helps us locate our common predicament in the world – that we experience suffering – in a common experience of God. God is so incarnate with us that God even experiences that which we experience in all its reality." (Kathleen T. Talvacchia in *Christianity and Crisis*, (Feb. 17, 1992), pp. 28-29). No matter how low we find ourselves, no matter the level of our suffering, Jesus has been there. And Jesus is there with us and feels our pain. Jesus experienced that same sense of

isolation/loss/disconnection. Jesus has been where we find ourselves, desperate/unattended/cutoff. When we received that diagnosis, when the phone rang in the middle of the night, when the knock at the door came in the wee hours, when one so close to us died so suddenly and unexpectedly. When our closest friend or partner left us. When we lost our job, or when we felt forsaken, discouraged and thrown away. When we face our own abandonment and deep despair, Jesus knows just how we are feeling, because Jesus has been there. Jesus has felt abandoned and despairing in that dark place as well. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus joins us in our despair.

And our world is simply filled with despair. The powers and principalities still believe that violence holds the key to life despite all the evidence to the contrary. Imagine God’s continuing pain over all the events that mar our world. Famine, war, terror in the Coptic Church in Egypt, huge bombs in Afghanistan. God’s tears and sorrow continue as we don’t seem to learn that God calls forth a sacrificial love. Love offers oneself for others. Always. Love is not about getting our needs met, but about extending our self to others. The Collect for Mission in the MP service puts Jesus’ action on this day in these terms: “Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace.”

I pray that out of this day, this bizarrely named day, we may come to know Jesus’ suffering and also his closeness and intimacy. The early church reflected carefully in trying to make sense of Good Friday. And now we too gather here to recall Jesus’ suffering and its meaning for us.

And yet, as dark as this day was, with death its outcome, violence will not prevail. Despite what those in power believe, the divine love is always active in the world and death is not the only outcome. But that is a story for another day, and until then we will wait and watch.