

Sermon for Good Friday 2021

Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22; Hebrews 10:16-25; John 18:1-19:42

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The Good Friday Gospel is so powerful that it seems a shame to follow it with a sermon. What can I add to the story that is not already in your hearts? What can I say that will not muffle the impact of what we've just heard?

My fear, indeed, is that what I say will lessen the impact of the Gospel events. Christians have been discussing what happened and what this all means for two thousand years now... and while it has sometimes brought us together, the discussion has also led to schisms and fractures in our communion, to wars against each other and against our siblings from the other Abrahamic faiths, and to arguments about small details rather than a focus on the larger picture of disconnection from, and reconnection to, God's love for all of God's creation. We have analyzed and discussed these events for millennia, and will probably continue to do so "to the ends of the ages," whether we ought to or not.

Thing is... I wonder if in part we talk about the events of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday because the discussion allows us to distance ourselves from the brutal, horrible facts of what happened. When we analyze, discuss, debate, interpret, we put an intellectual veil between ourselves and what is going on. We allow ourselves not to see and feel and hear what happened on that overwhelming Friday. But it's only by seeing and feeling and hearing, by allowing ourselves to be overwhelmed by the horror of these events, that we can fully appreciate the Easter resurrection. Let's face it – the world as it had been came to an end on Good Friday. That is one of the central tenets of our faith. The miracle of the resurrection has no meaning if we don't recognize and live with the reality of that death that stares us in the face. Easter joy has no foundation if there is no Good Friday grief. And no amount of discussion can, or should, change that.

And so, even though some of you might want me to pretty up this story, to rush us through to the good news that surely is coming, I am not going to give in to that temptation. Yes, the author of the letter to the Hebrews is right – this will end up being good news, the best news of all. It is through Christ's death that we can and do receive the mercy and grace we need. But we must not focus on the good news so much that we forget how very bad this first Good Friday was. If any day is the day for "holding fast to the confession of our hope without wavering," as the author of the letter to the Hebrews puts it, it's today. But we know that that was an impossibility for the people who lived through this story. So today we need to put ourselves in the hearts and minds of the people who were there. The disciples, the women at the cross, all the people who were part of Jesus' life, had no one to tell them this would turn out all right. They had no idea what was coming next. As far as they knew, their world was at an end. The new life that they had looked forward to was smashed beyond repair. All the lessons that Jesus had taught, everything they hoped and dreamed for – all as dead as the man hanging in full view of everyone. All they had left were broken pieces of a dream, and the very real fear of persecution and death for themselves.

When something terrible happens, it seems like every detail is burned into our hearts and minds, never to be forgotten, however much we may wish for the relief of unknowing. And so I wonder if all the details in the Gospel are there precisely to break through our intellects and make the story real for us. Perhaps the Gospel writer, by including all these details, is trying to press home the facts of this horrible reality. How stark and uncompromising are the words that tell the story! Soldiers and police with lanterns and torches. A sword flashing in the night to maim an innocent bystander. A night that is so cold that the soldiers and slaves must have a fire or risk freezing to death. A mob that cries out for the spectacle of crucifixion. Community leaders trying to live with bad laws and a bad political situation, rather than risking what might happen if those laws are overthrown and the society changes. A crown of thorns brutally shoved down on Jesus' head. Soldiers gambling in the shadow of dying men. Blood. Spears. Death. Darkness. So many details, so many facts, that finally we want to turn away in horror. But we must not.

Because in contrast with these brutal details, we have the actions of the priests, the warning tale of what can happen to us when we do turn away from reality, when we insulate ourselves behind intellectual walls and justifications. When Jesus is taken to Pilate, John writes that the priests "did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover." And later, John says, the same priests ask for the deaths of those crucified with Jesus to be hurried along... they ask for the soldiers to break the convicts' legs... so that reality won't intrude on the ritual celebrations. The priests have discussed and analyzed and debated so much that the consequences of what they are doing have been muffled out of existence. They are more concerned about ritual defilement than the very real defilement caused by their actions in conspiring in the death of an innocent man "for the good of the people." They will go home and eat the Passover meal with ritually clean hands, unaware of what else has been sacrificed on this horrible day. The world has come to an end, and they are untouched.

We can understand, in our minds, why the priests might have acted in this fashion, even as we condemn their actions and their inability to see God in action. Most of us have been in life situations where we want to be shielded from reality – where we need the rough edges of life smoothed away so that we aren't too battered to continue. The overwhelming events of Good Friday really do seem too much to bear without muffling them in some way. And yet, we must bear it, or we won't understand in our hearts and our souls – and yes, in our minds – the price that was paid for us and for our salvation.

We know that the story really doesn't end today. We know why these horrible events happened. We can see and believe all the connections between these events and the whole Biblical story, Isaiah and the Psalms and the rest. And very soon we will hear that resurrection message of the world made new again. But "soon" is not today. Today is not the day for explanations and foreknowledge. Today is for remembering that the world as we know it has indeed come to an end. It is finished. Christ has died through our actions and the actions of many. Those who still will not see and believe, those who still refuse to respect the dignity of every human being, those who refuse to love their neighbors as themselves, continue to crucify him today. So today, we stand at the foot of the cross, in the darkness. And we grieve.