

SERMON- Good Friday (B)

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~~Isaiah 52:13-53:12~~

John 18:1-19:42

Good Shepherd

April 2, 2021

~~Psalm 22~~

OPENING:

Our Good Friday service faces a similar question that we as individuals face to that eternal question:

“What do you *say* when someone dies?”

When someone dies, the moment compels us to do something, the Spirit moves us show up to give witness, but often then we realize that we don't know quite what to say.

Now, of course, when that question is asked in terms of the death of Jesus Christ, our Liturgy today offers great help because it answers it so beautifully, later with the Solemn Collects and the Reproaches, and just now with the Passion Reading itself.

In a nutshell, you answer the question: “What do we say when Jesus died?” by telling the story.

For 2000 years, we have been trying to come to terms with it and one way has been to try to get the details right. This is how it happened; this is how Jesus died. By naming the reality, you can begin to start understanding the tremendous loss.

PASTORAL

Now, in our lives, some answer the question “what do you say when someone dies?” by asking another one.

People ask: “How did it happen?” “how did you find them?” “where were you when you heard?”

Those are pretty good questions because they are oftentimes more answerable than “How do you feel? What does this mean in your life going forward?”

Again, by stating the facts, it begins to form the reality of the loss, and gives words to the grief on at least one level.

These moments are so pregnant with meaning, so precious, that we go over the story in detail, sometimes it's help to hear the story in a couple ways from multiple perspectives.

That's, of course, what we are doing on Good Friday as we take the leap to try to find ourselves in the Passion story.

One commentator writes that "... standing there at the foot of the cross with others who love him, and putting our arms around each other for comfort and strength..." "this is where we need to enter the Good Friday drama, and this is where we need to take our stand..." "...so that when they ask us later what happened (when Jesus died) we can say, 'I was standing at the foot of the cross...'"¹ 'This is what happened, this is how I recall it, I was right here next to him...'

SILENCE:

Now another good answer to "What do you say when someone dies?" is: "nothing at all."

One's greatest gift to the bereaved is not burdening them with words.

Silence is one of the great inheritances from Jewish customs, of course: the concept of "sitting *shiva*": to abide in the home of the loved one of the dead where no words are exchanged, and visitors wait for those in grief to start the conversation.

The mourner, then, is under no obligation to speak and may, in fact, completely ignore those who have come to sit *shiva*.

We should recognize 'Silence' then as a gift of Good Friday and Holy Saturday, where the Holy Spirit fills the room with what is needed, and our faith in a God who died on a cross is relied on.

There is the story from someone whose father died, and lots of people came to visit, all eager to say something and to hear the son say something. The son later was relieved to reveal that:

"There was one person, though, that came and did not say anything to me: no recitation of Scripture or platitudes or even well-wishes.

He just followed me around.

So, when I sat down, he sat down; when I stood up, he stood up.

When I went to the kitchen, he followed me there."² It was odd... but in doing so that visitor modeled something about God's presence, about the "everywhere-ness" and "every time-ness" of God. And while everyone else needed something from the son, that visitor didn't.

Can we do the same today, to be present and witness and allow God's Friday to occur?

¹ Somerville, Jim Green. 2009. "Pastoral Perspective." (Good Friday) *Feasting on the Word- Year C, Volume 2*. Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 304. (Emphasis Added)

² Paraphrase of Quotation in Patton, John. 2005. *Pastoral Care: an Essential Guide*. Nashville: Abingdon, 56.

GOSPEL

Only in John's Gospel do the women and the Beloved Disciple get close to the Cross, elsewhere they look on from a distance, but in John's version by getting close and remaining quiet they provide a remarkable example of silence and mourning.

Whereas Peter and Pilate and Caiaphas cannot keep their mouths shut as Jesus is dying, and by doing so, dig themselves deeper into the morass of complicity in the death... Jesus' family remains quiet. They listen and they watch.

From the Cross, Jesus tells his mother "Women, behold your son." He tells the beloved Disciple: "Behold your mother!"³

Jesus is not just speaking here logistically, as in take care of her in your house. Jesus is saying: a new community is being reconstituted/ re-formed, new life is happening that transcends biology.

So, even as the mourners are speechless and aggrieved, this group is also part of something so powerfully "Good" on this Good Friday amidst the pain and death and suffering.

How? Because God cannot stop creating, even as Jesus is dying.

It's all happening right in front of Jesus, in the course of his dying.

Jesus is saying: "You will leave this place, you will try to make sense of this death, you will tell the story, and you will then form something greater, the Church."

Our Opening Collect has this in mind as it reads:

"we pray you graciously to behold this your family."⁴

We are the legacy of that family that mourns, and that was formed on that Good Friday.

We too are at the foot of the cross, we don't know what to say, but we represent the new community, the Church.

"What do we say when someone dies?"

I had a seminary professor who said the thing to say when you show up at someone's house after someone has died, is:

"Who do we need to call?"

By saying that, you convey that life still goes, that a new family will be formed, new life will spring from this death because God cannot stop creating, even as someone is dying.

³ John 19.25-27 (New King James Version)

⁴ *Book of Common Prayer*, page 276

EASTER

I will admit that I like that advice better because, for me, all this silence is very disconcerting, and I can barely handle it.

When I did my clinical pastoral education at a hospital, I witnessed a number of patients who were, in hospital speak, “actively dying.” And where I served was at a large teaching hospital so, very often, there would be individuals dying while an array of young medical students in training looked on around the hospital bed. A lead doctor would be in charge of the scene as the monitors counted down and the breath slowed and the pulse lowered.

They had tried this and they had tried that, they had tried everything, but death was coming.

And I think it was for teaching reasons, but maybe also legal reasons, the head doctor would say “Does anyone have any more ideas?”

Anyone else want to try to anything?

Anyone have any ideas on how to treat this person? Anyone have any ideas?”

The lead doctor would repeat those words, amidst the beeping and the slow breaths, and no one would be saying anything and everything would be counting down.

I would be sitting there in the background,

with my coat and tie

and “Chaplain Intern” badge,

sitting at a distance from the Cross, as it were,

feeling like an idiot, frankly,

trying not to get in the way,

kind of in awe of what was happening and kind of out of place.

Somewhere in my brain I would have an impulse to speak,

to say “I have an idea”,

to say something about Easter,

about the resurrection,

something about life after death, and this is not all that there is.

But the other instinct, thankfully won out, that it’s not time for that.

“Be quiet Charles,” I would tell myself

“Be Silent, this is Good Friday,

God is here, and you are at the foot of the cross.”

AMEN