



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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GOOD FRIDAY, APRIL 7, 2023

ISAIAH 52:13-53:12; PSALM 22; HEBREWS 10:16-25; JOHN 18:1-19:42

EXCRUCIATING IMPLICATIONS FOR GOD

Among the world's major religions, Christianity is unique in its central tenet of faith that God becomes fully human. Setting aside transcendent power and detachment is a messy proposition. It complicates things because if God becomes fully human, there are excruciating implications for God. Good Friday bears witness to that once more, and we are step into the story again today. It's long; it's hard.

81 verses in all; nearly 2000 words. Read aloud it takes some twenty minutes to tell;

chanted takes nearly twice that. It's a lot, too much for one sitting, it would seem, and yet we need to hear it today, in toto.¹

We may want to hurry through the pain, the suffering. We can't fix it after all. We can't make it right. Jesus is condemned, tortured, mocked, shamed, and crucified. He's laid in a tomb, dead by all rights. Fully human and dead.

The cross becomes the symbol of failed goodness by any worldly measure—the

failure of humanity's goodness capitulating to conspiratorial forces of evil that sent Jesus to his wretched death; the failure of divine goodness to salvage humanity's collective soul without such suffering.

Was it necessary that Christ died on the cross? I don't know. But he did, and I don't think for a second God willed it to happen this way.

What I know is we call this Friday "good," but evil had its way with Jesus. Evil has its way with us, with all of us. I know we don't like to talk much about evil, but there is no avoiding it today, if we are going to be honest. Evil corrupts and destroys by convincing us of the merits of self-serving lies and violence against goodness.

Before I go further, I should say there is much about John's account of the passion of Christ that is problematic, and we would do well to resist its implied blame on all Jews as Christ-killers. Such extrapolations have been used for evil purposes by Christians for two millennia.

We are the ones who join the shuttering yell to crucify him. This is not a day of righteous finger-pointing. This is a day of complicit brokenness.

Caiaphas and his companions are not caricatures representing all Jews of all time. Their anxieties convinced them of the dilemma—that is, a forced choice between two bad options—kill the one innocent man to prevent the uprising they believed Jesus would lead and which the Romans would summarily suppress. Defenders of the faith, as it were. They justified it as the lesser of two evils, but it was still evil. And lest we want to stand in judgment of them, on this day of brutal truth-telling, we are invited to consider how we all succumb to our anxieties that convince us to spin off our moral compass in reckless and violent ways.

The disciples could have hung with Jesus, but they chose to flee instead, leaving Jesus alone in his desolation. Their abandonment was cruel; they capitulated to the forces of evil at work that day.

The Roman occupation of Palestine was evil. Pilate's reckless disregard for human life was evil. The blood sport of capital punishment by crucifixion was evil. It is not a stretch to find parallels of power and violence in today's world.

Evil had its way with Jesus that day; evil has its way with us. There is no "them" there. This is our story, and we tell it in its entirety today, as difficult as it is, because evil lingers where our anxieties and prejudices and power convince us that violence is the way. It takes great courage to hold the tense contractures of Good Friday.

The implications for God becoming fully human are excruciating because the choice is made to offer a different way, a way through the violence into something new. The word *excruciating* literally means, "arising from the cross." Can anything good arise from this terrible tragedy?

In a moment this Good Friday liturgy turns to the Biddings and Solemn Collects which date to at least the Second Century, and quite

possibly even the First Century in oral form. They are one of the oldest liturgical practices we have.

While they are not exhaustive, they are comprehensive in scope—that is, they lay claim to the premise that God's love is universal, encompassing all humanity—every last one of us. No one is beyond the reach of Christ's arms of love outstretched on the hard wood of the cross. No one is irredeemable in God's grand design, and divine goodness is not finished with us yet.

There is a probative pattern to each bidding and collect which are bookended by appeals to you. We chant them as invitations that might resonate with your soul. First,

Let us kneel in silent prayer... to hold the cruciform life before us, for all for whom we pray, and for ourselves also—the suffering you've experienced, the suffering you've caused—to hold what you can of it in the moment, trusting that Christ holds it with you. With you...

Diana Butler Bass once wrote the prepositions of Good Friday matter, and “with” is the most important one we have this day. “*with* is a preposition of relationship, implying accompaniment, or moving in the same direction...*With* is the preposition of empathy, of sympathy, of being on the same side...I will go *with* you...*With* is about joining, being together.”ⁱⁱ

God is kin to us. A God of relationship. Here with us in this broken hurting world.

Which brings me to the bookend of the silent prayer between biddings and collects. After a time, a single word is chanted:

ⁱ Some of the exegetical themes are drawn from an essay by Melissa Earley, https://www.christiancentury.org/article/lectionary/april-7-good-friday-john-181-1942?code=c5RyaDnZFLxdBAWQKmRd&utm_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm_campaign=10550

Arise.

The invitation is a foreshadowing of things to come, and a witness to the promise that in the midst of all this, God is acting in ways that we cannot fully imagine just yet.

We come to the cross today in contemplation, and then arise in trust that Christ came as companion and conciliator, and refuses to let evil and violence have the final word. The story continues.

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