



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR  
GOOD FRIDAY, APRIL 10, 2020  
ISAIAH 52:13-53:12; PSALM 22; HEBREWS 10:16-25; JOHN 18:1-19:42

## SEEKING WISDOM ON GOOD FRIDAY

Five weeks ago I began my Lent, as I normally do, with a short spiritual retreat. This year I focused on the writings of the 14<sup>th</sup> Century Christian mystic, St. Julian of Norwich, while lodging at a serene retreat center in Northwest Connecticut.

While there, I was aware of coronavirus, and concerned even, anticipating some disruptions to our normal routines, but I had no idea that Lent would eventually take the shape it has for us all in the weeks since. Julian has been my companion in this odd season; and what I would say today is that her mystic wisdom offers a portal into this Good Friday experience and the passion of Christ as a relevant

meaning-marker for us in these extraordinary times.

I will tell you at the outset that I am convinced that worldly knowledge alone is insufficient resource for us to plot a path through this dark valley and find our way through to the other side. Which is why, I think, many are turning to the Church in this time—for solace, surely, and a sense of communal connection while we are separated, even isolated.

But I also believe humans instinctually know that this journey we are on requires more than epidemiology—knowledge of disease and prevention—it requires spiritual wisdom—a sapiential mapping of the journey as well, if we are to make sense

of it and frame the new normal to come within a construct of meaning and purpose. Wisdom employs a language layered with guideposts and touchstones by which we find our way.

Julian of Norwich is called a mystic because she dwelled much of her life within what we might call a “wisdom way of being.” We call such rare birds mystics, because they live a fringed existence where they see things from a different perspective. Non-mystics get glimpses of this realm, but we don’t dwell there for the most part. But we are drawn to it nevertheless, because we innately know there is some truth for us there, on the mystical fringes, some deeper meaning with which we can make sense of this life, harried and beleaguered as we may be in any given moment.

Good Friday can be taken at face value, as an annual retelling of the crucifixion of Jesus, and there’s nothing untoward about that, but its deeper wisdom is to be found when we hold that reference point and then step into the mystical experience of our own passion, loss and redemption and see ourselves as intimately connected to literally everything and everyone and all

the suffering bound up in the human experience. It takes great courage to go there.

You likely have heard Julian’s most famous line from her *Divine Revelations*: “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” T.S. Eliot would reassert it a half millennium later to imbue his epic poem with such wisdom. But when taken out of context, it has been appropriated as a “feel good cheer,” as a trite exhortation to just hang in there, everything’s gonna be alright.

I think we all know, at some level, that the world is not returning to way it was before, so whatever alright means, it does not mean “normal.”

Julian was thirty years old when she received the visions that included this divine reassurance from God that all shall be well. She was just six years old when the plague ravaged her city over a period of 18 months, leaving half the population dead. She was educated in the years that followed and discovered a deep faith that would eventually lead her to become the first woman to write a book in English—a book about her divine revelations.

In 1373, at age 30, while seriously ill and in agonizing pain, she prayed to God for three things:

1. A keen understanding of Christ's passion
2. That her sickness might serve as the crucible of conversion through which she might find union with God
3. That she be given three "wounds" that would shape the whole of her life—full contrition, boundless compassion, and steadfast longing for God.

With these three "gifts" in her heart, she came to realize just how profoundly burdened she was by sorrow that sin ravaged her and all humanity, robbing us of so much. She wished it were not so. Sin being the brokenness that separates us from God, one another and even our true selves. She laments to God and longs for what she calls "oneing" with God, even while this burden of sin is overwhelming to her.

In her vision, she hears God say, the world is broken now, humans are broken now, but all shall be well...

This is not an escape, but a telos to which we are all invited, even when we find ourselves in the depths of bewilderment, unsure of the path forward, or unsure we will ever make it out of the dark night. Julian perceives and understands the vision precisely because she has contrition, compassion, and a longing for union with God.

Oneing with God is our telos, our meaning and purpose, and even as Good Friday marks time in the shadowy haunts of our broken existence, our reference point remains resurrection.

It is no accident that in a few moments, when we pray the Solemn Collects of Good Friday, with each bidding to pray for this broken hurting world, we are invited to kneel, and then arise, arise and lift our voices to God. The movement is intended to speak the truth while forging hope as well. In doing so, we tap that layered language of mystical wisdom that affords us glimpses of the kingdom of God here and now, even while we struggle, with Julian, and the countless throngs, who approach the cross of Christ and its paradoxical gift as both heart-breaking

and reassuring witness that God is with us in the broken world.

With contrition, compassion and a longing for God in our own hearts, let us contemplate today not just on the crucifixion of Jesus as an historical event, but as a mystical portal into divine mercy and healing for the whole world, for every last one of us who have ever lived, or may yet be. The reach of Christ's loving

embrace on the cross, and the implications of Good Friday are boundless, even as they can only be approached at the fringe of existence. Who will you find there? What will you discover about yourself, and God, if you go there?



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