

“Mourning or Good?”

Good Friday. Manasquan Ministerium Ecumentical Service. March 21, 2008. Isaiah 52:13-53:12, John 19:17-42. Shiloh Baptist Church. Sermon by Holy Trinity Interim Assistant Pastor.

Death, it seems, so much death on our TVs and radios. Bombs in Iraq and Israel and Palestine. Starvation and genocide in Africa. Cranes falling into buildings. And these deaths – perhaps because they are so many and so overwhelming and so commonplace – sadly stop affecting us. We hear and close our ears. There’s nothing I can do, we say. These deaths are meaningless, it seems.

But of course they are not. Every one of these deaths has affected a next-of-kin, a mother, a spouse, a neighbor, or someone close at hand in some way. Some have affected hundreds, even thousands. Many of you pastors have buried beloved parishioners this Lent, some this week. And so we grieve. We mourn.

The German word for Good Friday is *Karfreitag*. *Kar* is an obsolete word today, but the original word meant mourning. Mourning Friday. The day Jesus’ disciples mourned, having lost all hope. A day for present-day disciples to fast. A day, if you remember years ago, when businesses all closed from noon to three. No one was in school, few at work. A day to call forth our final Lenten disciplines, a day to sit in church and perhaps to experience “fifteen minutes of truth” among all the other thoughts and distractions that constantly bombard our brains.

We are close to the end of our Lenten journey. We are taking the final walk through the graveyard. You who have come here today have the stomach to face the crux of the matter, the cross, the abandonment, the suffering, the death. And it is in this very emptiness, this very darkness, that the light of Christ shines most gloriously.

For only those who have known despair can appreciate hope. Only those of us who have confessed and acknowledged our sin and brokenness can appreciate and receive forgiveness. Only those of us who have the courage to face our own death can care that Jesus IS the Resurrection and the Life.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. First: the graveyard. The full tomb before the empty one.

This story told so beautifully by John is God's story; but it is a story FOR and ABOUT us.

But when you are the center of the universe, at least in your own mind, what good can another person's suffering and death mean for you? That is the root of our problems, is it not? The idea that we control our own destiny, that we are the only one looking out for Number One?

That was the great sin of Adam and Eve, of each of us: wishing to be Number One, wishing to have the freedom to do as WE see fit rather than as we are commanded by God and led by the Holy Spirit. Wishing to have the power of the Roman soldiers, the power of life and death. Having no end of OTHER GODS before the God who made us.

And when we are Number One, the deaths of our neighbors and friends and people across the world do indeed become meaningless to us.

But while we may mourn a few of them but brush most of them off in our busy haste, Good Friday's witness to us is that God participates in each of them. God doesn't just hold our hand and say, "yes, it's my will, it will be o.k." God in Jesus Christ experienced death. God knows the story of every death, for it is God's story! We see GOD on the cross today.

You have heard great drama in our Gospel reading. You have heard Jesus cry out in thirst. You might have remembered that beatitude verse: blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. So you might perceive more than simple thirst in Jesus' longing. Longing for righteousness is a deeper thirst than the dryness of the parched tongue of the tortured victim.

Righteousness is when God's will is done, when God reigns among us. When there is no violent death, no torture, no war, no shootings, no bombings. And for that righteousness Jesus hungered and thirsted. We are blessed when we experience that hunger and thirst with him. We are blessed when no death is meaningless to us, because no death is meaningless to God.

This week I heard the story of an American professor who was contacted by a professor at a university in Iraq who needed some information for an

aspect of her research. The American emailed her the information she requested, then asked how things were for her there. The Iraqi colleague emailed back that things were tense. Some of her colleagues had been arrested; many had fled the country. She and the American began emailing on a regular basis. Recently the Iraqi woman received a death threat and mentioned it to the American. The American expressed her deep sadness and horror at this situation. “Now,” says the American, “if I don’t get an email from her every couple days, I begin to worry about her safety.” The professional correspondence has become personal; the email friendship has made these women important to one another. If the Iraqi woman is assassinated, her death will be far from just another meaningless statistic to the American professor. She will be personally involved in this death if it, God forbid, should occur. Personally involved, as our Lord God is involved in every death.

In the Good Friday story you heard Jesus speak words of love for his mother Mary and for his friend and follower John. In his love for both, he entrusted them to one another. Much as in his love for us, he entrusts us to one another.

You have heard the Roman soldiers gambling for the one possession Jesus had that seemed to be of value: his seamless robe – probably made by a loving woman who, if she were present, ached to every sinew of her being.

And finally you heard the great cry, “It is finished!” For those who heard it that day it was the end of hope, the end of everything that was good. As we all know when our loved one dies, anything reminding us of ordinary life that day seems like an insult. This is the end. It is impossible that the sun will rise again. For those who had lived with Jesus, who had heard his words, who had seen his signs, this was the end. For those of us who know the continuation of the story, the words have a different meaning. We know that light will break forth once again. Yes, but for this hour, we honor the darkness.

The darkness in which every death is wrapped.

The darkness into which Jesus descended when he died. The darkness in which God participates with humanity, with you and with me.

If we haven't been paying attention this Lent, maybe now is the last chance for us to have the 15 minutes of truth that leads us to the life-changing place where the intense knowledge of our sin and doubt and the intense awareness of God's redeeming come together. There can indeed be no Easter without the truth of Good Friday.

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There is one remarkable piece of the story that we heard that is easy to overlook. Remember Nicodemus, the man who came to Jesus by night with questions and who heard Jesus tell him he must be born from above / born anew / born again by water AND the spirit. The man who heard Jesus tell him that God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him. We left that story back in the 3rd chapter of this Gospel of John and we wondered if Nicodemus, a prominent religious leader, "got it" or if he would only admire Jesus rather than following him.

Now we hear that when Joseph of Arimathea summoned up all his courage and connections in order to obtain Jesus' body from the Romans, Nicodemus also went to help bury it. And not only that, he provided valuable spices for our Lord's burial. It seems that his grief was as great or greater than that of the disciples, who had fled the scene in anguish. And this grief and love – and yes perhaps discipleship -- expressed itself in an act of enormous generosity. We see that God CAN change hearts and bring forth amazing fruits of faith.

We who had the courage to come here this noonday, to walk through the graveyard, to complete our Lenten journey in this meditation on Jesus' death, *we are like Nicodemus*. We have had our share of doubts in the night. Our religious leadership has had its share of bruises and questions. We ask ourselves if our faith is strong enough to withstand the burdens of the great lack of righteousness in our own lives and in the life of our family, our nation, our world. Like Jesus we thirst for righteousness; like Jesus we seek the comfort of friend, mother or son; like Jesus we see our possessions become meaningless to us when our very lives are at stake. And Jesus tells us we must be born anew / born again / born from above – and that he didn't come to condemn us but to save us.

If we call today “Mourning Friday”, as in German, we are facing reality head on, taking up the cross, grieving for the suffering and lack of righteousness. But if we call it “Good Friday”, as in English, we are confessing the Christian hope that no tragedy, no suffering, no unrighteousness —no death—can be outside God’s participation, God’s providence, God’s love and grace.

It is at the cross that the Gospel strikes full force, with the news that this radical participation of God in death is *for us!* No more need our own death be meaningless!

Jesus' elevation to the throne of the cross transforms our world, so that even the cross itself is transformed. No longer is it a symbol of torture and death. It has become a symbol of love and of life, of God’s solidarity with us in our thirst for righteousness. We are indeed blessed. This Friday is indeed Good.

We adore you, O Christ, and humbly bow before you, for by your cross of death you have brought life and hope to all. Amen.