

**Good Friday
April 7, 2023**

Sermon by Rev. Jerry LiaBraaten

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit. Amen.**

“All the world’s a stage. And all the men and women merely players.” So goes the first line from William Shakespeare’s play “As You Like It.” It’s from a monologue often referred to as The Seven Ages of Man in which Shakespeare briefly defines each of seven stages of a man from infant to elderly. It ends with these words “Last scene of all, That ends this strange eventful history, Is second childishness and mere oblivion, Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.”

“All the world’s a stage. And all the men and women merely players.” We’re merely players in this life? And this is how it ends? Rather depressing wouldn’t you say? But so it is as we gather on this Good Friday around the multiple scenes and scenarios of Jesus’ last hours, forced once again to confront the horrors of how we humans can treat each other.

We must ask again, “What’s good about Good Friday?”

Jesus, it seems, while at the center of all the action on this “stage,” is experiencing it on a different level or plain than all the rest of the men and women, the players in the story. He’s clearly there with them, physically feeling the pain of his suffering, yes. But at the same time he’s somewhere else. He gives us clues to that ‘somewhere else’ with his words from the cross, “It is finished.”

What is the “it” in that sentence?

If we trace his steps backward we hear his answer to this all-important question as he speaks to Pilate: “For this I was born, for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.”

Indeed, gospel-writer John connects Jesus with the messianic prophecies no less than five times throughout this reading with the words, “in order to fulfill” or something close to it. Each of these 5 “to fulfill” statements can be traced back to the Torah (the first five books of our Old Testament) or to the words of the prophets. In so doing John connects Jesus with the ancient promises of a coming messiah—in essence using the very evidence and arguments that the religious leaders are using to justify Jesus’ death against them to prove he is that messiah.

Jesus’ too, clearly identifies with this messianic vision. You may remember, back in January we revisited the story of Jesus’ baptism, complete with the descending dove and the words, “This is my son with whom I am well pleased.” From there we next followed Jesus into his wilderness temptation experience. Finally we see him back home in the synagogue in Nazareth where he reads the words from the scroll of Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good

news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free." Then he said something radical...something extremely radical. He said, "'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing,'" in other words, claiming that he was, indeed, the messiah.

Jesus, a Jew, clearly identified with these teachings of his Jewish faith...and more. He believed his mission was not just to bring life and the way of salvation to all people but to equip and empower his followers to do the same.

What we see in this story is the baton of God's unfinished mission being passed on from Jesus who saw the events of that first Good Friday as the culmination of his role in God's mission. We see, too, that we are here to carry on, to carry it forward into the future. God's future for all.

At a superficial level, it's easy to think that the reason Christ came into the world was to take away our pain and suffering, to make our lives peaceful and prosperous. To make us happy so our lives will feel like the t-shirt that reads, "Life is good."

But is that so...or is there a bigger reason for his coming?

When you were little and you skinned your knee or bumped your head. What's the first thing Mom would do for you? She would kiss it. And what did that kiss mean? It told you she loved you. And, it told you that because of that love, she was willing to enter into your pain. The bandaid she put on afterward was simply an action taken that confirmed her love.

Jesus didn't come to simply put a bandaid on our lives. Jesus came to heal the world with God's love. He came to teach us, his followers...to equip and empower us to do the same...to take up his messianic mission...to bring life and the way of salvation to the world. (The Pentecost event was the kiss of the Holy Spirit upon our lives...that we might experience and know God's healing love.

What the whole of Jesus' life--his teachings, his healings, his miracles--as well as his death says to us is this: That we are so much more than merely players on some stage somewhere for but a brief span of years.

As the current agents of Christ's messianic mission, we have our work cut out for us. Remember the reception Jesus received at that synagogue in Nazareth once he wrapped up the scroll with the claim, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing,"? His listeners' sentiments went from amazement to enragement and they sought his immediate death. We see the same reaction played out here in the events leading up to and through his crucifixion...that same reaction likely portends what our lives will be like if we follow in his stead. As Reinhold Niebuhr said, "If you're going to follow Jesus, you'd better be sure you look good on wood."

But that's not even half the story.

We must remember, the people in our reading did not yet have the benefit of the resurrection. But we do! And when we look at the whole picture of our lives, like Christ's, we see God's love revealed both in Jesus' messianic mission--and our own.

Today, Good Friday, it comes down to this. When we see what Jesus Christ has done for all people, for the world...When we consider how he has prepared us and continues to do so through his spirit's presence...When we experience again and again the power of his ever-healing, ever forgiving, ever empowering love...we realize two things:

One, that we are far more than merely players on the world's stage. And two, now it's up to us--just as Christ did--to put the good in Good Friday.

Amen.