

**Good Friday
April 18, 2014**

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

We just heard the Passion of Jesus read from John's gospel. It is the story of his trial, his scourging, his last steps, and his crucifixion. Jesus died on a cross. We know that from the biblical accounts in all four gospel and also from some extra-biblical writings. Jesus died on a cross. It must have been a horrible death. The Stations of the Cross which hang in the church for our weekly meditation during Lent tell the story of the Passion in a visual depiction. It was a horrific way to die.

Jesus died on the cross on what the Church calls Good Friday. He had come to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. But the story really began three years before in the backwaters of Galilee. Jesus was an obscure itinerant preacher from Nazareth of all places. He had preached a message about the "kingdom of God" ... a world as it would be if God were in charge. He had healed the sick, brought sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf ... and he ate with prostitutes and tax collectors and those on the margins of society. Yet, in him people saw something sacred and holy and even wondered if he might be the expected "messiah" ... God's anointed one. Now he had gone to the holy city of Jerusalem for the Passover and things had gone all wrong. He had entered in fanfare, but now he was hanging on a cross to die.

For those who had followed Jesus ... who had seen in him the divine spirit of God alive as they had never seen it before ... his crucifixion left them with many questions. Perhaps the primary question was, "Why? If this really was God's anointed, why would God let him die this way?"

When the Jewish people were faced with such questions they resorted to their scriptures to give meaning to events like this. For example, from the standpoint of world political history, the invasion of Israel by the Assyrians in the 7th century BCE was nothing more than an expansion of territory by a rising world power. Likewise, the Persian defeat of the Assyrians 60 years later was the reaction of a neighboring power that was feeling threatened by this land-grab by the upstart Assyrians.

But from the standpoint of the Jewish people the destruction of the Temple and their exile to Babylon was a sign from their God that something was very wrong. They had seen the heart of their religion destroyed when the Temple in Jerusalem was torn apart by the Assyrians, and then their society was torn apart when they had been deported to Babylon. Sixty years later, when King Cyrus of Persia rescued them from the Assyrians, they saw God giving them a new life ... a new opportunity to live faithfully with their God. To make sense of all this the Jews searched their scriptures to explain why their

God would allow all this to happen, and both the suffering and the restoration became a part of their Jewish identity.

Six hundred years later they were still searching their scriptures to explain the events around them. In the reading from John's gospel this evening we heard time and again quotes from the Hebrew Scriptures in the telling of the Passion of Jesus. After the death of Jesus there was a new question: "If Jesus was indeed a Son of God ... God's anointed ... why would God let this happen to him?"

In one sense the gospel stories were an attempt at answering that question. Mark was written 30 to 40 years after Jesus died on the cross. Matthew was written 45 to 65 years after the crucifixion, and Luke about 5 to 15 years later. And John ... from which we just read the Passion ... was written about 60 to 75 years after these events ... at least two full generations. These were not first-hand accounts, but rather the story of Jesus patterned after other stories from the Hebrew Scriptures. Most Jews in the first and second century would have recognized the gospels as just that ... a way of telling an old story with new characters and in a new setting but using the words of their sacred writing to connect the two.

But that way of understanding and reading the gospels did not last long, and the stories about Jesus soon began to be read as literal history and biography. However, the question still remained: "Why God would let this happen?" For some this question was of little importance as they lived into the story of new life ... the story of the Resurrection. But for others it still was a significant missing piece ... a question still to be addressed.

In the fourth century of the Common Era a bishop of the Church living in Hippo ... a North African city on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea in what is now Algeria ... tackled the question. This bishop's name was Augustine ... St. Augustine. He developed the concept of "original sin." Augustine believed that all humans are born in original sin, and there was nothing humans could do to fully reconcile themselves with God. The only way that reconciliation could happen was by God's action. Thus, according to Augustine, Jesus' death on the cross was God's sacrifice for all humanity, and it was to bring about redemption. This is the theology known as "redemptive sacrifice." It is as if God was paying a ransom for our sins ... a ransom that we could not and cannot pay. Since the time of Augustine this has been the predominate theology of the Church.

Simply put, I do not agree with this understanding of Jesus' death. Much of Christian theology has been used to induce guilt and shame. It teaches that we humans are so bad that Jesus had to die on the cross to bring us redemption. The bloody and painful death serves to demonstrate the depth of our depravity. According to this "orthodox" belief we deserve all the beating and horrific scourging... but Jesus took it for us. That is what has been taught for almost 1,500 years. But, it is not the only way to tell the story.

Let me put the story in another context. This, for me, is the “Other Good Friday.”

I believe God loves all of humanity unconditionally. I believe we are all born as blessed and innocent children. I do not believe in “original sin,” rather, I believe in “original blessing.”

Jesus knew God’s unconditional love for him in such a way that others saw God alive in Jesus. And that love allowed ... compelled ... Jesus to proclaim a world where God’s love ... and God’s ways ... would be known by all. Jesus called this the “kingdom of God.” By his life Jesus lived as if the kingdom of God was already present. And he spoke against those institutions that challenged such a kingdom. Jesus spoke truth to power, and I believe that speaking truth to power is what provoked his death.

The things Jesus did and the things Jesus said were provocative enough to put him on the wrong side of the authorities. He was critical of the Temple establishment, and he was disapproving of the political system. Jesus spoke truth to power ... the status quo needed to be changed ... and I believe that is what prompted his crucifixion.

Jesus challenged systems of authority that took advantage of widows, of the poor, and of the outcast. And Jesus created a movement. This movement was so threatening that those in control felt the need to stop him ... perhaps even to make of him an example. Jesus spoke truth to the power of hierarchal religious norms and of an inequitable economic system. And I believe that is why he died on a cross.

Jesus was on the side of people who were oppressed by the policies of the temple. He was on the side of people considered unclean and sinners by the religious leaders. Jesus is remembered for telling parables and stories that upset people. Jesus used a phrase “kingdom of God” ... a phrase that by its very nature was in opposition to the kingdom of Caesar. For Jesus this was a spiritual statement, but for the occupying Roman government it was a political challenge. Proclaiming the “kingdom of God” was a statement of hope. It wasn’t just a fantasy, a story. This is the kingdom to live for, to work for, perhaps even to die for. It is a kingdom of justice and compassion. In this kingdom of God ... in God’s economy ... the hungry are filled with good things. That was Jesus’ message. That is what Jesus took seriously. Jesus was about making changes in this world. And I believe that is why the powers killed him.

Jesus talked about compassion. He talked about moving beyond ethnic boundaries and divisions. Jesus worked to bring people together: Samaritan and Jew, Greek and Roman. Jesus practiced an open table, rich and poor, male and female. He challenged unjust boundaries and rules. Jesus spoke truth to power and I believe that is what got him killed.

Jesus believed things could be better for the world, not just the few with wealth and power. For life and the fullness of life ... he died. For integrity ... he died. For compassion ... he died. For justice ... he died. For trying to change the world into what it might look like if God were in charge ... he died.

This, for me, is the “Other Good Friday.” It is not about “redemptive sacrifice.” It is about living in this world in such a way as to offer a glimpse of what God’s kingdom might look like. It means speaking truth to the powers ... all the powers ... of this world and being willing to live with the consequences, even if it is death on the cross. It means taking seriously what Jesus took seriously.

Jesus showed us what it really means to love ... to love God and to love others ... even strangers ... so much as to be willing to die for them. Jesus could love in that way because he knew the fullness of God’s love, and he trusted God wherever that love would lead him. After Jesus’ death his disciples understood that love in a way they did not ... nor could not ... know when Jesus was alive. When the disciples finally understood the depth of that love ... and could make it their own ... that was when Jesus was alive to them again. That was the moment of the Resurrection. But we wait until Sunday to celebrate that.

I believe God loves all of humanity unconditionally. We are all born as blessed and innocent children. I do not believe in “original sin,” rather, I believe in “original blessing.” Jesus knew God’s love for him in such a way that others saw God alive in him. And that love allowed ... compelled ... Jesus to proclaim a world where God’s love ... and God’s ways would be known by all. Jesus called this the kingdom of God. By his life he lived as if the kingdom of God was already present. And he spoke against those institutions that defied such a kingdom. Jesus spoke truth to power, and I believe that is what got him killed. That is the Other Good Friday.

Amen.