

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith

Holy Comforter

Richmond VA

April 3, 2015; Good Friday

Readings: Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22; Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9; John 18:1-19:42.

God Enters Fully Into our Lives

Yesterday, on Maundy Thursday, I spoke of how we are able to share in the life of Christ through the sacraments, such as Holy Communion, and through sacramental acts, such as foot washing.

Through prayer and spiritual practices, we open ourselves to God and we seek to know God, to enter into the life of God.

On Good Friday, we remember once again how God through Christ gave everything to share in our lives...to enter into every pain, defeat, tragedy, death, of our lives and of the life of our world.

Today we remember and give thanks that Jesus gave the greatest gift that anyone can give...to sacrifice his or her life for another or for a cause worthy of such a sacrifice.

And yet, this is a day in the Church calendar that many are glad to pass over, in favor of focusing on the joy of Easter.

Why is that?

It might seem obvious, but let's really consider it.

Is it like me, when for a year or more I won't go to any movies that are particularly sad or depressing, feeling that I have enough to deal with in my life and the news of the day?

Is it like that?

Someone saying, "why would we want to go to that Good Friday drama when we can wait a day or two and experience Easter?"

I probably have missed some really good films over the years.

But when people miss consistently, year after year, the experience of

Good Friday, they are not missing something external to their lives as Christians, they are missing a central piece of the mystery of God with us.

And yet, I don't blame anyone who wants to avoid this day.

This is a hard day.

But the fact is, we can't avoid this day in our own lives, and through Jesus' gift of himself given for us, we don't have to go through our Good Fridays alone.

Reading James Farwell's book, *This Is the Night, Suffering Salvation and the Liturgies of Holy Week*, I found a well-crafted explanation of what keeps people away for Good Friday services, and perhaps why more people don't come to other Holy Week services.

We have in our society, in our culture, many people telling us that suffering is the exception to a normal life.

Farwell writes, "It is one of the privileged assumptions of modernity that human beings are involved in a grand story of progress in which, little by little, through the interaction of technology and capital, humanity is growing toward a more perfect future....

[This is the] kind of narrative in which suffering is reduced to an unfortunate but inevitable moment in the process of growth toward a greater good."¹

And so if it is just a moment but not central to the story, then why go to church on Good Friday when we can have Easter?

Well, you know that Easter isn't Easter without Good Friday.

And our lives are not our lives without the Good Fridays in them and the crosses we bear.

¹ Farwell, James. *This Is the Night: Suffering, Salvation, and The Liturgies of Holy Week*. New York: T & T Clark, 2005, p. 8.

So why are we here tonight?
For what are we hoping?

Are we here out of a sense of duty?

There is nothing wrong with that...having a sense of gratitude for all that
God has done for you and wanting to, in a sense, be there for
Jesus on this day.

But perhaps God wants us to have an even deeper experience of God's
love for us...God's passion for us...on this day, because of what
happened long ago in a small corner of the Empire to a man
with whom the Romans and those in authority were glad to be done.

Good Friday is not just about remembering something that happened long
ago...it is also about sharing in that part of Christ's life now and
opening ourselves to God....opening all of ourselves to
God...sharing our pain, our challenges, our suffering with
God, so that God be with us in the part of life many
people seek to ignore.

As well, it can be easy, in Church, to be very general in what we say, but it
is in the specifics of life that God's grace is known.

So for that reason, I share with you a specific story from my life, and also
so that it may suggest to you a way to pray with Jesus about the
Cross and Good Friday.

There was a time in my life, when I started to realized the extent to which I
was holding on to a cross in my life because that's how I had always
lived.

In prayer and reflection, I had an image of my situation as being nailed to
a cross and really noticing it for the first time, as uncomfortable as
it was, it was what I had always known, for this was a cross
that was constructed for me in childhood.

I had no idea what to do.

I did not have the answer.

And Jesus, in prayer, in my imagination, came to me, and pulled the nails

out, and I know I'm going to fall, because those nails were holding me in place, and as I start to fall, once the nails are removed, Jesus catches me.

As Farwell puts it, "God's power and will to transform our lives not after we 'get through' suffering, but in the midst of it...[this]...is the very reality that is the good news of Easter."

I also like how Farwell describes every service of Holy Week, Thursday through Saturday, "is a ritual interweaving of suffering borne and hope celebrated."²

Jesus died because Jesus was born into a broken and sinful world. Jesus did not have to die, necessarily---God did not let Jesus die because we are sinners---God our Father, God our Mother, gave Jesus to a world that couldn't tolerate him and still can't. God with us - Jesus, the Christ - healed people when it was not allowed, spoke to people no one else would speak to - started to get a following that threatened those in power.

In the way Jesus gave himself to the world...it was inevitable that he would give all of himself...for us...God's love for us...God's passion for us...is known on the cross.

A few weeks ago, on the 5th Sunday of Lent, we had a Gospel reading in which people said that they wanted to see Jesus.

But who was the Jesus they wanted to see?

Who is the Jesus that we want to see?

We don't really want to see Jesus being beaten and made to carry the cross through the streets.

We don't really want to see Jesus being nailed to the cross.

We don't really want to see Jesus suffer on the cross.

² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

We don't really want to see Jesus die.

And yet, we must.

But when we do with the eyes of faith, we see suffering borne and also hope.

And unlike the movies that I don't want to see because they are sad and depressing, when we look on this drama, we are not looking at something external to ourselves to our lives.

We participate in the life of Christ, and in the events of Jesus' Passion, his last days in this life.

God was making a connection with us...participating in our suffering in a mystical way...beyond time and space...in prayer I have imagined that Jesus on the cross was looking out beyond the things visible in his time...looking out and seeing all the suffering of the world, that ever was and ever will be,
seeing my suffering,
your suffering...to take that on, to carry it for us, to strengthen us to bear our cross. Amen.