

Good Friday, 29 March 2024
Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa
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[Isaiah 52:13—53:12; Psalm 22; Hebrews 10:16-25; John 18:1—19:24]

This time around in particular, I think maybe I get it a little more why (in my experience anyway) Good Friday usually isn't one of our higher attendance days in the Episcopal Church. There is so much violence, so much rage, so much war, so much suffering and cruelty and death around our world today... Gaza and Israel, Haiti, Ukraine and Russia, Sudan, other wars in Africa, it goes on and on.

Why come hear another story of violence and brutality?

How have you been managing to navigate and take it all in? How has it all been landing for you?

I try to pay attention to what's happening, but I feel like I've been getting numb.

But here we are.

In one of our Gospel readings during Lent, we heard Jesus say:

Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.¹

Here Jesus recalls the strange, archaic story from the book of Numbers about the poisonous fiery snakes that attacked the unfaithful Israelites in the wilderness, and of how God commands Moses to make a serpent of bronze and lift it on a pole, so that in looking at the image of what afflicts them, they might be cured.²

So Jesus is lifted up, that in *looking* at the image of what afflicts us—not turning away—we might be cured.

And on a more recent Sunday we heard Jesus say:

Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.³

And John adds,

He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.⁴

So, in John's Gospel, we are invited to contemplate the crucified Jesus, to see in this tortured body, racked in pain, all the sufferings of the world, and thereby to be somehow healed, somehow transformed, somehow made whole. And not just that, but that in the end, we and the whole world will be irresistibly attracted and brought together by what we see in Jesus, lifted up on the cross.

A love that is indestructible.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not conquer it.⁵

Never more true than at the cross.

Biblical narrative tends to be spare, and the Gospels are no exception. These stories don't spell everything out in detail. That way we can hear the stories again and again and find new questions to ask, new connections to notice, new depths to ponder. But also, as for the story we hear this week and today especially, we should keep in mind that crucifixion was not a faraway, unfamiliar thing to the people who gave us the gospel texts, nor to the first generations of those who heard the story we have just heard.

Unlike us, they knew. They knew what was involved; they knew the kinds of things that happened, the kinds of things that were done. They

¹ John 3:14

² Numbers 21:6-9

³ John 12:31-32

⁴ John 12:33

⁵ John 1:5

knew something of what death by crucifixion was like. They had seen it.

Or they had looked away, which was the point, really: for people to turn away in horror, revulsion, fear, and shame.

I won't detail the cruelties, pain, agony, and shame of crucifixion, all that typically led up to it, and the ways that it actually killed a person. If you want, *when* you want, when *you* feel ready, the internet stands ready; a few thoughtful google searches can help you. I even recommend it, but only when *you* decide that *you* are ready. Suffice it to say that it probably remains the cruelest, most excruciatingly and variously painful, and most humiliating means of death ever devised *by* human beings *for* human beings.

The *point* was for you to look away, and to be filled with such horror, disgust, fear, and shame that you would never want to see such a thing again, and that you would never, ever, consider doing anything that might bring such an end upon you or anyone you cared about.

But the Gospels ask us not to turn away. To stay. To look. To contemplate. To be affected.

And John's Gospel especially, which we always turn to for the liturgy of Good Friday, wants us to stay, to look, to contemplate. John has been preparing us for this moment throughout this Gospel, as in those passages I've already mentioned. There are others. At one point, Jesus says to the Pharisees:

*When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I AM.*⁶

As Moses turned aside to look at the bush that was blazing with fire but not consumed⁷, and heard God speak the Divine Name, I AM WHO I AM, John would have us see the fire of the divine presence shining forth in the broken body of Jesus on the cross. Burning but not consumed, he will not be turned from loving us, from his infinite openness to us and to all. God in Jesus, Jesus in God, saying to us: I will not cease to be who I am. I will not be

turned from loving you. I will not cease to be who I am.

The crucified Jesus, John is telling us, is not only the image of what afflicts us as human beings—this, *this* is what you are doing to one another, to yourselves—that we may look upon it and be healed. It is also the manifestation and glorification of the Divine Name, it is God telling us and showing us *who God is*. It is a theophany, a manifestation of God—for John, THE pivotal manifestation of the Divine Presence in all of history—that God may be seen for who God is, and draw all people, and the whole creation, to Godself.

Indeed, we can reach back further in John's Gospel, to the close of it's first chapter, another passage which we've heard this year, on a Sunday in January. It's the very beginning of Jesus's public ministry, and he says to Philip and Nathanael:

*You shall see greater things than these... Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.*⁸

As in the dream of the fugitive patriarch Jacob in the book of Genesis, they will see a vision of God, of God's presence, heaven and earth joined, and the promise: "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go."⁹ This too, I believe John is telling us, finds it's fulfillment in Jesus being lifted up on the cross.

And at the last supper, Jesus says to Philip:

*Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father... Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in me?*¹⁰

Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.

Never more true than at the cross.

And what do we see?

What do you see?

⁸ John 1:51

⁹ Genesis 28:15

¹⁰ John 14:9-10

⁶ John 8:28

⁷ Exodus 3:1-15

If we can see God here, we see a God who, in our usual human understanding, is absolutely powerless. Today we see the powerlessness of God, the impotence of God. A God incapable of domination or coercion because those are contrary to who God is. An infinite, undefended openness to the suffering of this world.

God has no other power but love.

I have long treasured these words of Martin Smith about John's portrayal of the crucified Jesus:

John is communicating through these images his deep conviction that God has no coercive power. God cannot overpower us, nor force us in any direction. In the vulnerability of the cross God reveals that the only power that can change us is one that attracts us freely, with the offer of healing. The stock-in-trade images of conventional belief, which picture God as an emperor in the sky, the wrathful enforcer of law, the deity who sanctions the rule of the strong, are shown up in the light of the cross as projections and idols. God's only power lies in the attractiveness of life and light to those who yearn for them. The only role God can play in relation to our brokenness is that of healer. All God can do is radiate this attraction through and from the one who in this world remained steadfastly in that light even as he was being destroyed.¹¹

In other words: I will not cease to be who I AM.

And the great 20th century Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote:

He alone would henceforth be the measure and thus also the meaning of all impotence. He wanted to sink so low that in the future all falling would be a falling into him, and every streamlet of bitterness and despair would henceforth run down into his lowermost abyss.¹²

Today we are shown something that we can only very slowly come to understand, as the love of God awakens and grows in us, thawing and breaking

open our hearts. Today we see God's inviolable vulnerability. Jesus reigns from his throne, from the cross, as king of glory. Emanuel, God with us, God always already with us, shining in the darkness.

This is who God has truly been all along.

Today we see that God's power, God's omnipotence, is identical with God's vulnerability. God's power *is* God's weakness. God's vulnerability *is* God's omnipotence.

In this weakness, in this surrender in death, in this dying, in this infinite, undefended openness, God is making all things new.

The weakness of Jesus crucified is the power of the Creator. "I will not cease to be who I AM."

God's only power lies in the attractiveness of life and light to those who yearn for them. The only role God can play in relation to our brokenness is that of healer. All God can do is radiate this attraction through and from the one who in this world remained steadfastly in that light even as he was being destroyed.

What might happen if this power—this vulnerability, this mercy, this weakness, this justice, this love—what might happen if *this God* took hold of us?

What might happen to you, to me, if that happened?

Today we are in the presence of this power.

Today we can open our hearts to allow this love, this weakness, this power, this vulnerability, this omnipotent impotence to transform us, little by little, as we let ourselves fall...

fall...

fall... into him, into the lowermost abyss of his compassion, his infinite openness, into the new creation.

¹¹ Martin Smith, *Love Set Free: Meditations on the Passion According to St. John* (Boston: Cowley, 1998), 22f.

¹² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Heart of the World* (San Francisco, Ignatius, 1979), 43; quoted in Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 218n.