



Grieving the Innocent Victim: Entering the Emotional World of Good Friday

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sean Lanigan
Good Friday ~ April 19, 2019*

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high. Just as there were many who were astonished at him—so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals—so he shall startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which had not been told them they shall see, and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate. Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account. Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people. They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the Lord shall prosper. Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their

Psalm 22:1-11

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| 1 My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? *
and are so far from my cry
and from the words of my distress? | 7 scorned by all and despised by the people.
All who see me laugh me to scorn; *
they curl their lips and wag their heads, saying, |
| 2 O my God, I cry in the daytime, but you do not answer; *
by night as well, but I find no rest. | 8 "He trusted in the Lord; let him deliver him; *
let him rescue him, if he delights in him." |
| 3 Yet you are the Holy One, *
enthroned upon the praises of Israel. | 9 Yet you are he who took me out of the womb, *
and kept me safe upon my mother's breast. |
| 4 Our forefathers put their trust in you; *
they trusted, and you delivered them. | 10 I have been entrusted to you ever since I was born; *
you were my God when I was still in my mother's womb. |
| 5 They cried out to you and were delivered; *
they trusted in you and were not put to shame. | 11 Be not far from me, for trouble is near, *
and there is none to help. |
| 6 But as for me, I am a worm and no man, * | |

Hebrews 10:16-25

"This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds," he also adds, "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more." Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin. Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed

with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

John 18:1—19:42

The Betrayal and Arrest of Jesus

After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples. So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons. Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, “Whom are you looking for?” They answered, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus replied, “I am he.” Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. When Jesus said to them, “I am he,” they stepped back and fell to the ground. Again he asked them, “Whom are you looking for?” And they said, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus answered, “I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these men go.” This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken, “I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me.” Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest’s slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave’s name was Malchus. Jesus said to Peter, “Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?”

Jesus before the High Priest

So the soldiers, their officer, and the Jewish police arrested Jesus and bound him. First they took him to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people.

Peter Denies Jesus

Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest, but Peter was standing outside at the gate. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out, spoke to the woman who guarded the gate, and brought Peter in. The woman said to Peter, “You are not also one of this man’s disciples, are you?” He said, “I am not.” Now the slaves and the police had made a charcoal fire because it was cold, and they were standing around it and warming themselves. Peter also was standing with them and warming himself.

The High Priest Questions Jesus

Then the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching. Jesus answered, “I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them; they know what I said.” When he had said this, one of the police standing nearby struck Jesus on the face, saying, “Is that how you answer the high priest?” Jesus answered, “If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?” Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

Peter Denies Jesus Again

Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. They asked him, “You are not also one of his disciples, are you?” He denied it and said, “I am not.” One of the slaves of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, “Did I not see you in the garden with him?” Again Peter denied it, and at that moment the cock crowed.

Jesus before Pilate

Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate’s headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover. So Pilate went out to them and said, “What accusation do you bring against this man?” They answered, “If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.” Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law.” The Jews replied, “We are not permitted to put anyone to death.” (This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.)

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” Pilate replied, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?” Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” Pilate asked him, “What is truth?”

Jesus Sentenced to Death

After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, "I find no case against him. But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" They shouted in reply, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a bandit.

Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. They kept coming up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and striking him on the face. Pilate went out again and said to them, "Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him." So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Here is the man!" When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him." The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God."

Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. Pilate therefore said to him, "Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?" Jesus answered him, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin." From then on Pilate tried to release him, but the Jews cried out, "If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor."

When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge's bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew Gabbatha. Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, "Here is your King!" They cried out, "Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!" Pilate asked them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but the emperor." Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.

The Crucifixion of Jesus

So they took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them. Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek. Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but, 'This man said, I am King of the Jews.'" Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written." When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took his tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. So they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see who will get it." This was to fulfill what the scripture says,

"They divided my clothes among themselves,
and for my clothing they cast lots."

And that is what the soldiers did.

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), "I am thirsty." A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Jesus' Side Is Pierced

Since it was the day of Preparation, the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross during the sabbath, especially because that sabbath was a day of great solemnity. So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed. Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out. (He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth.) These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled, "None of his bones shall be broken." And again another passage of scripture says, "They will look on the one whom they have pierced."

The Burial of Jesus

After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his

body. Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

I never feel as if I quite know what to say during Holy Week...and words seem to escape me most on *this* day, on Good Friday. I'm always so grateful that we leave in silence at the end of worship on this somber day. Because I really don't have much at all to say. This day feels too big for words, somehow, too monumental to be fully embraced and encompassed by language. Words are too paltry, too thin.

And yet, words are expected. Sense-making words. Emotion-soothing words. Words that turn the horrific event we are remembering into a neat packet of word-y wisdom that you can put in your pocket and take with you. Words to reassure you that someone or something is at the helm of this otherwise apparently sinking ship of despair; words that explicate and ameliorate the chaotic darkness of grief into which Good Friday plunges us; words that smooth out the roughness of the road to Calvary and that shine a hopeful beam into the dense haze of our sorrow.

But here's the thing: I'm not here to guide you. I'm not here to make this all better. I'm not here to give Jesus' death a meaning and a purpose—an explanation. Not today, at least.

I'm here, rather, to lead you deeper in. To welcome you into the despair and grief and sorrow. To help you to give it an audience, a hearing. To tell you that you don't have to run away. That it won't kill you. That you might even need to experience it. Need it far more than you can admit. Need permission to come in contact with these terrors. A legitimate reason to dwell in these depths of sorrow.

Now, Good Friday has become an increasingly disconcerting observance for me, ever since arriving at St. Peter's. Especially after the Noon service for the past several years, I've observed many folks congregating out on the sidewalk huddled together and chatting about all the usual stuff: trips and shows and dinner plans and the weather. I can hear these conversations from the sacristy as I remove my microphone and robes, everything feeling heavy and thick with significance. And I've had to squash the urge to go and hush those who are talking...laughing even.

He just died!!! Can you please just be sad for a bit??? Doesn't this impact you—hearing again how Jesus suffered, how he died? The wrenching agony of it all?

But I don't. Because I want to run away from it all, too. I want to cloak it all in words—a dense proliferation of words. Words that explain. Words that make sense. Words that smooth our furrowed brows and make it all better.

But I think giving those kinds of words too much airtime would be a mistake. Because people like us often use words to block out feelings; to drown out emotion with a torrent of verbiage. Words tend to feel so good, so important, so revelatory...to a highly literate bunch like us.

But I sometimes miss the permission for tears, for sadness, for grief—all of which were part of the piety of my childhood. Good Friday was a day, above all, to **feel**. To feel deeply—together. To feel all the hard things. The very things we hold at bay on all the other days of the year.

Because if we can't let ourselves get sad about this, then what in the world CAN we get sad about? How can we possibly fulfill our calling to "mourn with those who mourn," if we can't bear to grieve this death? This death of one we know. This death of one we love.

I've been wondering this week about the difficulty some of us have with entering the emotional world of Good Friday. And I've been wondering if one reason we struggle is because Jesus' death just isn't all that shocking to us. His death, it seems, has lost whatever ability it might have once had to appall us.

Because we live in a world of Good Fridays, don't we? In a world captivated, enthralled, and overcome by violence. And yet the violence that so many of us consume is violence without consequences, without aftermath, without bodies. We're closer than ever, yet also always at a distance.

An ethicist on the faculty of Duke Divinity School, Amy Laura Hall, shared a short essay on social media this week as the extraordinarily popular and extraordinarily violent television show, *Game of Thrones*, premiered its final season.

Hall says:

“Watching human beings violate one another in the worst possible ways on a screen can cause a kind of numbness, making horror mundane.”ⁱ

This mundaneness makes it all the easier for us to accept, then, as we seem to have done after 9/11, the use of brutality for political ends. Indeed, perhaps it was the proliferation of screen violence that dulled our moral outrage when we discovered that our government was involved in torture (paraphrased).

How did we get here?

From 1995-2001, a period of six years, there were 110 scenes of torture on prime time broadcast TV.

Following September 11th, from 2002-2005, 624 scenes of torture were broadcast. And this trend continued.

Through constant exposure, we seemed to have become convinced that torture is simply how the world works (paraphrased).ⁱⁱ

Just as the residents of Jerusalem must have under Roman occupation, with its frequent public executions of dissidents, often performed by the tortuous means of crucifixion. Crucifixions, usually done along well-traveled roadways to maximize public display as bodies hung there for days, were the ancient world’s form of mass media. At some point, the horror must have become quotidian back then, too.

Well...perhaps you, like me, avoid violent shows and movies.

Still, we live in an ever more collectively desensitized world.

And the sheer quantity of violence that so many consume seems to be impacting our overall cultural sensibilities, eroding the ability we might once have had protect ourselves from those forces that defile our minds and hearts.

Indeed, the proliferation of such easily consumable violence has made it much harder, I think, for us to care about victims. Because there are so many. Far too many to count. Both fictional victims very real ones—the two continually becoming more easily conflated and confused. So we begin to consign all victims to anonymity, out of necessity. To do otherwise, to learn their names and hear their stories, would consume us. Or so we think.

Today, however, we are asked to hear just **one** story. To say the name of just one victim. One victim of state-sponsored brutality, torture. To feel his suffering in our bodies.

And if we discover that we can feel for him...if our hearts can be broken open by his story, then there is a possibility that our hearts might yet be permeable to other victims, other stories.

His story is unique, of course. Because it does not play by the world’s rules.

For the world does not believe in resurrection. Nor does the world believe that victims matter. Yet still: here we are. We are here for a crucified victim.

One who should have been forgotten by history. One who should have become anonymized.

Yet the crucified one was raised. His resurrected presence was so vivid and so hopeful that he could not be forgotten. Would never be forgotten.

But he was not raised just so that we could marvel at God’s handiwork. He was raised to vindicate victims. He was raised to give hope to all those struggling to hope. He was raised as a radical demonstration of God’s solidarity with the suffering, the weak, the afflicted. He was raised so that we might finally know who and what matters to God.

But here I go explaining. Exactly what we don’t need today. Because you’ve heard it all before.

But have you felt it? Really felt it?

Have you suffered with him as the thorns tore his scalp?

Have you winced and shuddered as the nails gashed open his hands?

Have you gasped with him as he struggled for breath, suspended, dangling for hours from that cross.
Or have you been desensitized? By this blood-bathed world of ours?
Have you forgotten that he was flesh, like us? That it hurt. That it really, really hurt.
Because if we could let his suffering penetrate our defenses, it would unleash our compassion. It would arouse us from our slumber of indifference toward this whole crucified world yearning for just a taste of resurrection.
This day should do something to us. But for it to do something, first we must feel. And feel deeply.

Amen.

ⁱ Amy Laura Hall, public Facebook post from April 15, 2019.

ⁱⁱ Amy Laura Hall, public Facebook post from April 15, 2019 (paraphrased).