

Isaiah 52:13-53:12
Psalm 22
Hebrews 10:16-25
John 18:1-19:42

Good Friday A
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island
April 10, 2020
The Rev. Karen Haig

*Lord Jesus Christ,
as we kneel at the foot of your cross,
help us to see and know your love for us,
so that we may place at your feet
all that we have and all that we are. Amen.*

There is a stillness now that we've come to this day. A spareness. It feels deep to me - and dark and empty. Sad, and quiet. The death we knew would come, has come. There has been a lot of death lately, more than most of us can take in. And somehow that is helping me to make deeper meaning of Jesus' suffering and death on the cross. It helps me to understand why we tell this very hard part of God's story over and over again. The thing that draws us into the deep, dark, mysterious place that is Jesus death is our own human suffering. And I understand that on this particular Good Friday, better than I ever have.

As desolate and heartbreaking as this place feels, I think we come to the foot of the cross because somewhere deep inside ourselves we know, or at least we hope, that all this suffering has something to do with love. It isn't something we understand so much as it is something we feel - that somehow Jesus' death on the cross has something to do with the way God loves us. It's hard to make sense of really. How can it possibly be that great suffering and death on a cross equal love?

I think we come back to this hard story over and over again because it's a true story. It's the truest story we have for all the terrible things that happen in our world, the truest story for what is happening right now. I think we come back to this story because we know that suffering is a very real part of human life. This story is real just as our stories are real.

Anyone who has loved deeply, knows how costly love is. When we love with our whole hearts, we get hurt because people are messy and complicated and fragile. Good Friday shows us the beauty of being with suffering and shows us how to do that. Open. undefended. Willing. Obedient. Connected. Broken. Powerless. Empty.

There is so very much suffering right now, it feels as though the whole world is heartbroken. And if we didn't have a God who endured suffering as deep and dark and tragic as our lives can be, as so many lives are right now, we might be tempted to believe that God abandons us in our suffering. "What kind of God could let doctors who are trying to save people die?" "Why would I believe in a God who allows a virus to kill thousands of people?" "If God allows suffering such as this, I don't want any part of it." These are the heartbreaking questions of the ones who don't really know God's story.

That is why we tell the hard part of the story over and over again. We tell it because we need to know in the very depths of our beings that God is with us in absolutely everything, and especially in our suffering. We tell the hard parts of the story over and over again, because when we are willing to stand at the foot of the cross, when we are willing to be with, or to try to be with Jesus in his suffering, we begin to realize that we cannot possibly suffer anything God has not suffered. We begin to realize that when our hearts are breaking, God's heart is breaking too.

I don't believe that God wills us to suffer. But we do suffer.

I don't believe that God willed Jesus to suffer or to die on that cross. But he did.

Jesus died because he never for a moment stopped living as God wants all of us to live, pouring out love for the life of the world.

Jesus died the same way he lived – pouring everything out for the sake of love. Even in his dying, he blessed the ones who had him killed. He could have pulled his “God card” when his taunters cried “*Save yourself and come down from that cross.*” But he didn't. He did what you and I have to do when we're in the last place on earth we'd ever want to be. He stayed. He stayed and he blessed. In his living and his dying, Jesus really did take every possible human experience into himself, and so into God. And he did it all with boundless love. Even in the very worst forsaken place, he loved. And as strange as it might seem, he loved us by staying and suffering so that we would know, *deep down in our bones*, that no matter what misery we experience, God has experienced that misery too. No matter how wretched our lives, God will never, ever abandon us. God will stay and God will bless.

Death on the cross was not something God did TO Jesus. What happened on the cross was something God did AS Jesus. God took in all our sadness, our brokenness and our suffering AS Jesus, and that was an act of unspeakable love. What happened on the cross made God's infinite love visible in a world that didn't want to look at it. Perhaps knowing that God turns suffering into love will help us to look at it.

So you see, suffering and death on a cross really do equal love. We don't have to wait for Easter resurrection to know that life overcomes death and love wins. Even at the foot of the cross, we see glimpses of the Kingdom of Heaven and the power of God's boundless love. That love was nailed to a cross, but it did not die. Because we live now and not then, we know that – we know there is resurrection at the end of the story. And six months ago, we might have been tempted to look past the hard parts, to skip over the suffering and dying. We don't have that luxury today. ***What we do have*** is the knowledge that our God came not just to be with us, but to become us.

What we do have is a God can be trusted to plummet the depths of despair with us. What we do have is a God who does in us, just what God did in Jesus. God incarnates, not just in Jesus but in us too. We are where God shows up in the world. What will happen to us if we don't remember that? What will happen to the world?

On Good Friday, God invites us to stand at the foot of the cross, and to stay there until we know it to be a sign of the indescribable love God can make out of suffering. It isn't easy to look. It will help if we do it together. I think now, we are finally beginning to know ourselves to be one with the ones we love the best and the ones we like the least. There is so very much suffering in our world, and when we're willing to look, willing to stay at the foot of the cross... only then can we see God changing suffering into love. We are learning to stay. Learning to stay in our homes, learning to stay connected in ways we never imagined, learning to stay with, rather than turn away from the suffering in our world. That's one of the ways God is redeeming this tragic virus already. We are learning that we really are all one, and that is so very beautiful. Perhaps we'll find a kind of strength we never knew was possible and with God's grace, we will take our part in transforming the world's suffering into love.

Take time this Good Friday to let God's immeasurable love settle in you. Remember that suffering, even death, never has the last word. God transformed Jesus' suffering and death into pure love. And that's why we call this day "good." Amen.