

Good Friday, 2019
St. Barnabas, Bainbridge Island

I am going to ask you some questions, and your response is, "*I am here*".
Judas, slave of jealousy, where are you?...
Peter, slave of fear, where are you?...
Thomas, slave of doubt, where are you?...
Men and women of Jerusalem, enslaved by mob violence, where are you?...
Pilate, slave of expediency, where are you?...

Good. You're all here, then. The crucified God has something to say to you:

You are forgiven.

Do you think that is an easy thing for God to say?

A 19th century poet thought so. On his deathbed, he said,
"Of course God will forgive me. It's his business."
But, as one psychologist has put it,
"Forgiveness is hard work. It takes time, and involves pain."

We know from personal experience how hard forgiveness is.

But what about God?

Do you suppose it's hard work for God, who has to forgive a whole world of wrong?

What if God just got fed up?

What if God did *not* so love the world?

One of the stories we will tell tomorrow night at the Vigil considers this possibility.
It begins like this:

In the 9th generation after Adam and Eve,
God considered the state of the world,
but all God could find was corruption and greed,
violence and hatred and hearts of stone.

You know the story. God regrets making humankind,
and decides to wash creation clean with a great flood.

We get that. We've seen enough of human sin these days to know the feeling of righteous anger. And sometimes the Bible attributes such anger to God. *Your anger weighs upon me heavily*, says the Psalmist.

That's an uncomfortable image, but is it inappropriate in the face of so much sin: the Holocaust, Hiroshima, 9/11, climate change, the resurgence of racism and hate crimes, the caging of children?

There's a biblical term no one likes very much: *the wrath of God*. It tends to conjure up images of an angry father, choking with rage, sweeping plates and glasses off the table and reaching for the strap.

But what the Bible means by divine wrath is a refusal by the Creator to ignore the wrongness of things, an impatience with the self-destructive waywardness of a rebellious world.

If we were God, could we ignore the gravity of sin?
Does God let bygones be bygones, and just move on?
Wouldn't such a blind eye be a kind of complicity with evil?
"There, there, don't worry about Auschwitz. I'm sure you meant well."

Are some things unforgivable?
Are there certain kinds of damage that just can't be mended?

Remember how thousands of lives were ruined by the fraudulence of Bernie Madoff? A prominent rabbi said at the time, "It is not possible for him to atone for all the damage he did." That's a chilling statement. Are there some sins for which there is no atonement?

Malcolm X, not long before he was assassinated in 1965, asked this angry question:

"What atonement would the God of Justice demand for the robbery of black people's labor, their lives, their true identities, their culture, their history—and even their human dignity? A desegregated cup of coffee, a theater, public toilets—the whole range of hypocritical "integration"—these are not atonement."

Some years ago at a parish south of Seattle, I led a series of interactive encounters with the Old Testament stories we tell at the Easter Vigil. And on the night we worked on the Flood story, I asked everyone to write on a card a person or type of person that the earth would be better off without. The cards were put in the center of our circle, and you had to draw one out of the pile. Whatever character you drew, you had to play him or her, and you had to argue your case for being included on the ark's passenger list. Then the rest of the group would debate your accountability and render a judgment.

There were drug dealers, child abusers, rapists, Enron executives, Osama bin Laden (that will tell you how long ago this was! But I'm sure it wouldn't be hard for us to come up with brand new list.). The debate grew passionate at times. And then we'd vote with a show of hands: Saved? Or drowned? We all had somebody we wanted, in our heart of hearts, to drown.

Alexsandr Solzhenitsyn, who knew something about human evil, spoke to this question of crime and punishment: "If only it were so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"

And how did our vote go in the Flood exercise? None of the men voted forgiveness for the worst offenders. But some of the women wanted to forgive everyone.

One of those women had lost her brother five years earlier, when a guy broke a beer bottle over his head in a bar fight and killed him. During the trial, she wrote a letter to her brother's killer, saying she forgave him. One of the things which led her to such a difficult act was seeing the film *Dead Man Walking*, in which a nun says to a murderer as he walks to the execution chamber, "I will be the face of love for you."

Seeing the film was a conversion experience for this woman, and she became committed to the work of forgiveness, even for her brother's killer. The rest of her family, however, was furious at her for breaking ranks. Forgiveness cost her great deal.

What does forgiveness cost God?

We wonder this, on this Good Friday, here at the foot of the cross.
Clearly, it costs no less than everything.

Remember what we sang during communion on Palm Sunday?

Love that gives, gives evermore,
Gives with zeal, with eager hands,
Spares not, keeps not, all outpours,
Ventures all, its all expends.

Well, as we just sang before the Passion gospel,
this is wondrous love indeed.

Our hymnal has changed a few of the words, however
The original says,

What wondrous love is this, that caused the Lord of bliss,
To bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for my soul,
To bear the dreadful curse for my soul.

The hymnal committee evidently thought that sounded a bit too harsh for
Episcopal ears. Surely we are not *all* under the curse of Adam's fall.

In Clint Eastwood's film, *The Unforgiven*, a young gunfighter is trying to process
the fact that he just killed a man for the first time. The act has shaken his personal
sense of innocence, and he tries to compensate by saying to Eastwood, "Well, he
had it coming!" And Eastwood, an old gunfighter who is trying to put a life of
killing behind him, replies, "Kid, we've all got it coming."

We've all got it coming.

Or as Ishmael exclaims in *Moby Dick*: "Heaven have mercy on us all, Presbyterians
and Pagans alike, for we are all somehow dreadfully cracked about the head, and
sadly in need of mending."

To say we've all got it coming doesn't mean that you and I don't have our good days. But sin in the biblical sense isn't really about our individual report cards. It is the whole interconnected web of wrong which holds us in bondage no matter how good our intentions are. Sin is deeply embedded in our culture, our economics, our politics, our family history, our psyches, our DNA. It's so much bigger than our individual choices, so far beyond our ability to mend.

Whether by default or intention, we are all implicated in the great web of wrong. Look how the infection of racism seems to resist every cure. Look how helpless we are to put on the brakes of climate change as we careen toward apocalypse. Look how often we find ourselves doing things we would rather not do.

*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves.
Who will deliver me from this body of death?*

You know those words. They're from the New Testament, spoken by people who were not only brutally honest about the human condition—they were well aware that we all have it coming—but they were also full of hope because of one thing: the cross.

Karl Barth, one of the greatest theologians of our era, says this so powerfully:

The very heart of atonement [on the cross] is the overcoming of sin: sin in its character as the rebellion of humanity against God, and in its character as the ground of humanity's hopeless destiny in death." God atones for sin "as a human in our place, by treading the way of sinners to its bitter end, in death, in destruction, in the limitless anguish of separation from God . . . by suffering the punishment which we have all brought upon ourselves.

This is echoed in so many hymns:

Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears for ever flow,
All for sin could not atone;
Thou must save, and thou alone.

Lo, the Good Shepherd, for the sheep is offered;
The slave hath sinned, and the Son hath suffered;
For our atonement, while we nothing heeded,
God interceded.

Only God could save us.
And God did.
And the cost?
Priceless.

How wonderful and beyond all knowing, O God,
is your mercy and loving-kindness to us . . .
Behold, what love God has bestowed upon us,
who to redeem a servant, delivered up his only Son.
O blessed iniquity,
for whose redemption such a price was paid by such a Savior.

We have heard many times that Jesus died for our sins.
This has sometimes been taken to mean that
Jesus paid a debt we ourselves could not meet,
as though it were simply a matter of cosmic bookkeeping.
Our prodigal sinning ran up a huge bill,
but God just reached for the check and said, "I've got this."

But in fact the crucifixion was deeply personal for God.
God's own self hung on that cross.
Not just Jesus, but the Father and the Spirit too,
each in their own way,
shared the pain of that bitter and excruciating death.
Any parent who has lost a child knows the truth of such shared suffering.

This wasn't an angry God needing to be placated by a sacrificial lamb.
The cross isn't something God does *to* Jesus.
It is something God does *as* Jesus.

Love itself takes our place on the cross,
not as a substitute or replacement, but as a companion,
sharing the uttermost extremities of our lost and broken condition.

God became everything about us that needs mending.
God became sin for us, and accepted sin's consequences.
God assumed the fate of every sinner,
and like every sinner, God suffered death.

What happened next is a great mystery.
It's hard to find words for it,
but it has sometimes been pictured as a battle between life and death.
Between Yes and No.

And God won that battle. As we will hear at the Easter Vigil in the famous Paschal Homily of St. John Chrysostom:

"Death was angered when it met [God] in the pit."

It was angered, for it was defeated.
It was angered, for it was mocked.
It was angered, for it was abolished.
It was angered, for it was overthrown.
It was angered, for it was bound in chains.

God swallowed death,
took death into God's own self,
and let death exhaust itself in the fathomless abyss of self-diffusive Love,
until all death's power was nullified,
and transformed from a black hole of annihilation
into the very gate of heaven.

And the great mystery of death and resurrection is that in the act of sharing our most wretched condition on the cross, Christ made it possible for us to share Christ's most glorious condition, to rise with him and become partakers in life eternal.

"As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive" (I Cor. 15:22)

Just as Christ is our companion on the cross,
we are made Christ's companions in resurrection.

The strife is o'er, the battle done,
The victory of life is won.

That is the word from the cross.
But our experience tells us
that the process of living into that victory is ongoing and incomplete.
We are still on our way. We are still becoming what we most truly are.

But even along the way, even in the darkest of times,
we may still know the grace of Christ's victory.

When the concentration camp at Ravensbruck was liberated in 1945, a scrap of crumpled paper was found near the body of a dead child. And on that paper were these words:

O Lord, remember not only the men and women of goodwill, but also those of ill will. But do not remember the suffering they have inflicted on us. Remember the fruits we brought to this suffering—our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, the courage, the generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of all this. And when they come to judgment, let all the fruits that we have borne be their forgiveness.

In that same death camp, just a few months earlier—in fact, on Good Friday—a group of women were being lined up outside the gas chamber. And one of these women suddenly broke down and became hysterical. There were other prisoners standing nearby, ones who had not been chosen for death that day. And one of them stepped out of the crowd and walked over to the woman who was frenzied with fear. She said to her, "It's all right. It's all right. I'll take your place."

And so Mother Maria Pilenko, a nun who had devoted her life to the poor, entered the gas chamber in that woman's place.

And is that not the word being spoken to us from the cross?
"It's all right," says the Crucified One. "It's all right. I've taken your place."