

John 18:1-19:42
St. Andrew's, Nogales

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How to tell the story of this day?

The story is so well known that we want to forget how overwhelming it is. It is such a gruesome story, a story of betrayal, of abandonment, of ridicule and suffering, one of horrible suffering, that of being nailed to and left hanging on a cross, in the heat of the day, to die.

The disciples and those who knew them, our earliest ancestors in the faith, knew they had to tell the story.

But how to tell it? How to tell it?

Here was their beloved teacher, the person who invited them to leave their ordinary lives and follow him. The one who not only taught them about God's love, but who lived his teaching each and every day. The one who looked at each and every individual he ever met and saw the true person, the child of God, before him, not someone to be despised or ignored because they were from a different culture or were considered sinners in their tradition.

The one who fed the hungry and healed the sick. The one who insisted the little children, non-persons in his time, come to him to be blessed. The one who had compassion for all.

Here was their beloved teacher condemned to death on a cross, that horrible invention of the Romans, their form of capital punishment meant to frighten their subjects into submission to their rule.

And here was something even harder for the disciples to bear as they began to reflect on the events of that day we dare to call Good Friday: they themselves had participated in the events leading to his death. They had abandoned him in the garden, they had denied knowing him, they had let their fear of the Hebrew authorities, and especially the Romans authorities, silence them.

How to tell the story.

Clearly the disciples and the others who knew Jesus felt compelled to tell the story. And the writers of the gospels who had heard the story a generation or two later also were compelled to write it down so the story would continue to be told for all the generations to come after them.

Let us not forget that these first tellers and writers of the story were Jews and they were writing about an extraordinary person, also a Jew.

How to tell the story, especially the gruesome part about his suffering and death on a cross.

These faithful and inspired tellers and writers of the story turned to their own Hebrew scriptures and there they found the help they needed to tell the story.

Two of these scriptures are among our lessons today: the Song of the Suffering Servant from Second Isaiah and Psalm 22, very likely one of the Psalms written by King David himself.

Our ancestors in the faith turned to Second Isaiah, which was written during the most traumatic period in the history of the Hebrew people, which saw the destruction of their temple and years of exile in Babylon.

“Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows,” the King James version of the Song of the Suffering servant reminds us. He has borne our sickness, weakness, and pain and any other kind of suffering we know. Everything that we suffer and all the wrong we participate in are carried by the one who suffers for us and with us. The servant takes what is ours and makes it his, and that enables us, on this day, and every day, to know that we do not bear our griefs and sorrows alone.

“He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities.” The servant carries our sins and iniquities, those things that we do or participate in, those acts that separate us from God, and that makes us able to turn again to God for help.

“By his wounds we are healed.” He has taken all our sins upon him and we are forgiven and healed. He gives us a new start every day of our lives. He makes us, and all creation, new.

Our ancestors in the faith also heard the suffering of their beloved teacher in the words of the writer of the Twenty Second Psalm, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus himself is said to have uttered these very words from the Psalm as he hung on the cross.

And each Good Friday, as we accompany Jesus on the cross, we hear those words repeated. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” We Christians are not supposed to say such things. We’re supposed to know that God is with us through thick and thin. To hear these words from our Savior on the cross is almost scandalous. And yet, they challenge us to consider things we would rather not consider: the inseparability of incarnation and suffering, of death and of hope, hope even in the face of death.

This day, that we dare to call Good Friday, reminds us that all is not sweetness and light. Bitterness and darkness are part of our existence also. Our cries of

despair, our rages against suffering and death, our cries arising out of powerlessness and abandonment, and not only our own cries, but those of countless others in the world, are remembered, yes even celebrated on this day, this day we dare to call GOOD Friday. We are called to sit with such suffering and complaint on this day. We cannot ignore them now.

On this day we are called to face human evil as Jesus faced it in his life on this earth. He lived among a group of people subject to the Roman Empire. He lived in occupied territory. The Romans expected their conquered peoples to conform. And capital punishment through death on a cross was one tool to enforce their power and assure conformity.

Theologian Walter Brueggemann reminds us “Empires are never built, nor are they maintained, on the basis of compassion.”

And yet the disciples had followed someone who lived a life full of compassion. Jesus speaks up. He acts. He heals the sick and recovers the sight of the blind. He eats with the poor and abandoned. Nora Gallagher reminds us “This leads him finally and inexorably to the cross, to the place where power and vulnerability intersect or – more accurately – collide.”

And his own people, including his disciples, did not challenge that power. Some not only collaborated, but also actually manipulated the Roman authorities into bringing him to the point of death, nailed to and hanging on a cross. That is the part that, I believe, is perhaps the hardest for us to swallow on this day, this day that we dare to call Good Friday, because it causes us to face our own collusion with the powers that be in our own time.

How do we live lives of compassion in our own time? That is our challenge. That is the challenge of Jesus’ suffering on the cross, on this day, this day that we dare to call GOOD Friday.

Amen.