

“You Can’t Avoid It”

Good Friday comes up upon us every year as a kind of bad habit we’d really like to quit. We don’t like putting ourselves through this annual ritual of tears and sorrow. We want a faith that is upbeat, smiling, encouraging, maybe even fun! What a downer this day always turns out to be.

Part of it is just the sheer human emotive response we have to any story about death. We read accounts in the newspaper about this atrocity, or that violent set of actions, and we recoil. *“How can people do such things to one another?”* we wonder in our hearts. At least until we confront our own capacity of anger and outrage, and only barely beat back the desire to lash out, fight back, repay, hurt the other. We want to be convinced that we are not at all like those we read about who act with cruelty, hatred, disdain for others . . . but in our more brutally honest moments, we realize that we are different only by degree. Just hearing about the suffering that Jesus endures puts that lump solidly in our throats, brings that tear to our eyes, and covers us like a funeral pall.

Part of it is also the injustice of it all. It is bad enough to think about someone going through such torment and grief because of the guilt of the own actions. But we today we hear about a man we know to be innocent — who just about everyone in the story knows to be innocent — but who is nonetheless subjected to false accusations, beatings, insults, and finally one of the most cruel forms of capital punishment ever devised. Our sense of justice recoils at this treatment. We want someone to blame — the Pharisees, Pilate, Judas, the crowd, the disciples — of course the last thing we want to do in this mood is to look in a mirror.

Part of it is feelings of guilt this day lays on us. We sang those words from the familiar hymn

*“Yet, O Lord, not this alone Make me see your Passion
But it’s cause to me make known And its termination.*

*For I also and my sin Wrought your deep affliction;
This the shameful cause has been Of your crucifixion.”*

We hate that part . . . being told that this death was our responsibility. We want to deny it . . . we want to proclaim our innocence . . . but we would just as soon not have anyone go too deeply into details because in the back of minds, and in our heart of hearts, we know the accusation to be true. All the more reason not to like Good Friday: it not only makes us feel guilty, it reminds us that we truly are guilty.

So we would like to skip past Good Friday, thank you. We already heard the sad story on Palm (excuse me, Passion) Sunday; do we really have to dwell on it? Can't we just celebrate the triumphant entry, then have nice supper in the Upper Room, and then just gather at the empty tomb?

We could . . . but should we?

No, the thing about Good Friday is that you just can't avoid it.

First of all: it happened. Ignoring what happened is hardly ever a good idea. If there was success and victory, we need to know how that happened in case we need to come back to it. If there was failure and setback, we need to know that so we don't repeat the same mistakes. Simply sweeping something under the carpet of history provides nothing good. What we need to determine about Good Friday is: which was it? Mistake or success? Victory or failure?

The tone would suggest that Good Friday is mistake and failure. All the “good” folks are in tears and shock; all the rotten actors are acting as if they won (or at least solved a problem). But this is what comes of trying to ignore what happened: we wind up thinking what happened was one thing, and it turns out to be just the opposite.

Good Friday is often represented as the failure that Easter turns into victory. No! Good Friday is the victory. The tenth stanza of “O Sacred Head Now Wounded” reads

*“Be Thou my consolation, My Shield when I must die;
Remind me of Thy Passion When my last hour draws nigh.*

*Mine eyes shall then behold Thee, Upon Thy cross shall dwell,
My heart by faith enfold Thee. Who dieth thus dies well.”*

It is Jesus’ death that we look to as the anchor for faith. It is Jesus death that is the victory.

This is that curious thing that God so regularly does with His creation. God uses what appears to be weakness to display His power. God enters into failure and it becomes victory. God calls the least likely candidate to do His bidding, and then empowers that “bad choice” to do the very thing God desires. Look at the record: Abraham, Moses, Aaron, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea . . . Peter, Paul, I could go on — every last one of them flawed beyond use, but used by God in ways they could not imagine and quite frankly did not want to be used.

There is an immediately apparent reason why God does things this way: so that we never wind up thinking that our wonderfulness is what got the task done. St. Paul says it thus: ***“God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.”*** (1 Corinthians 1:27-29) Throughout time, God has acted in apparent weakness to work His will. There was nothing more central to God’s will for us than that His Son take our place to suffer the death we deserved. It happened . . . we rejoice that it happened.

We likewise cannot avoid Good Friday so that we comprehend its importance. Such a victory needs to be studied and restudied so we can make sense of it. It is, on the face of it, a conundrum: in order to live one must die. That makes no sense. We would have it read, *“To live you must live. Hold on to life at any cost!”* But that’s not God’s manner. God’s manner is to invite us to let go, realizing that life is in God’s hands always; we are invited to surrender ourselves into those hands, just as did Jesus.

The importance of Good Friday is that Jesus did so surrender — not just in that final moment, ***“Father into your hands I commend my spirit.”*** —

throughout His life Jesus was surrendered to the Father's will. He told us, ***“Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise.”*** Good Friday teaches us that we cannot avoid it without being faithless to God's will and purpose for our lives.

Lastly, if we seek to avoid Good Friday we miss a most startling aspect of the entire episode. Jesus told Martha just before He raised her brother Lazarus from death: ***“I am the resurrection and the life.”*** Look on the cross right now and say to yourself: ***“There hangs the resurrection and the life.”*** Better still, say it out loud. How can that be? How can resurrection and life die? ***“It can't,”*** we say.

Yet John records, ***“Jesus said, ‘It is finished.’ With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.”*** Again, a mystery. But then this whole incarnational thing is a mystery. We cannot explain it; we cannot understand it; we cannot avoid it. We have just one choice open to us: We must embrace it by faith.

And so we gather this night. We come in silence, in proper respect for what we witness. We sit and listen. We become sad, tearful, maybe even angry. We probably don't emote as deeply as we should, but then we've heard this many times before; some of the edge has been taken off. We sing funereal hymns. Our mood deepens low. We will hear yet again how God had made His plan for this event known throughout history.

As we move into darkness as each prophecy is read, we come to better appreciate how His first followers must have felt as helplessly they watched the scene unfold. We, too, we see where they lay Him, and the candle of His presence is taken from this space, and sealed away. And then, as we entered, we shall leave, in silence. We will be sad, downcast, sorrowful.

We gather because the Spirit has led us here. We gather because we need to hear again all that transpired to bring to us salvation and forgiveness. We gather because we want to express our sorrow, our contrition, for

what brought all of this on Jesus. We gather so that we might better grasp and express the utter joy that Easter morning brings to us because it so sharply contrasts with what we go through this night.

We gather, quite frankly, because we know this: We cannot avoid it.

Amen.