

Good Friday  
March 21, 2008 Year A  
The Episcopal Church of the Atonement  
The Rev. Nancy Webb Stroud

*Isaiah 52:13-53:12; John 18:1-19:42*

On Palm Sunday, we shared again the story of the Passion of Jesus, according to Mark. Beginning with the ride into Jerusalem, we rehearsed the week of painful and anxious events that led inexorably to this day when our Lord hung on the Cross. And just now, we heard it again, from a different point of view. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John wrote the four Gospels in the Bible—gospels, which means Good News. We read the Good News story of Jesus from four different points of view. Each one is different, but it is this story that they have in common: the story of Jesus' death—a story that will break our hearts—and yet, we call it the Good News. A good man, a loving man, one who cared for others more than himself, this is the one they put to death.

A dear friend once told me, as we were chatting after church on Palm Sunday, that she liked the service on Maundy Thursday and, of course she loved Easter Sunday. But she skipped the Friday in Holy Week because she did not want to hear the Passion story twice in the same week. "I'm not a Good Friday kind of girl," she shrugged.

Everybody has a story that will break your heart, they say. And I can understand my friend for not wanting to dwell in the sorrow. For sure this year, when pandemic and fractured civil discourse and systemic racism are raging through the world, we have a collective understanding of broken hearts. So why spend time today on this archetype of the broken-hearted, when we are longing for Good News? What is there in this story that will restore our hearts? What is there in our Holy Scripture that will bring healing to the heart-broken world of today?

The poetry from Isaiah that we have for the Old Testament lesson today is drawn from the heart-breaking stories of the people long centuries before the birth of Christ. The thing is, we don't know any of the details. The "suffering servant" is a figure in Isaiah's prophecy who is unidentified. Scholars suggest that the one who *was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity* is really a figure for the nation of Israel—the whole nation that suffered the calamity of domination by other kingdoms. But the same scholars suggest that there was a man, a single person who is being memorialized in this poetry—it's just that no one can identify who the person is. On this day, in this church that has been stripped of the presence of God, we read this poetry—and we know exactly who it is. Some 700 years after it was written, the poetry of Isaiah describes Jesus, who suffered and died, and in hanging on the Cross, drew others to Himself. Isaiah told a heart-breaking story hundreds of years in advance of the heart-breaking story that restores our hearts.

I used to walk to junior high school with the kid who lived next door. He was as active in his Mormon church as I was in my Episcopal Church. One day Craig said to me, "I cannot understand why you wear that Cross around your neck. It's like wearing a golden electric chair." It may have been the first time that I realized that what happened to Jesus was shameful. I understood the Cross to be a sign of God's victory over sorrow and sin. It is not that I did not know about shame—what child does not understand that? In this competitive world, where we

are constantly on display, always showing off our accomplishments to one another, who doesn't know about falling short, about being less than someone else?

Shame is easy to understand, and easy to feel. It is not that I did not know shame, it is just that I never really thought of *Jesus* and *shame* as connected. The crosses that I knew were like the golden one that I wore around my neck—they were signs of the triumph of Easter—gold for the glory of God. I knew about the exaltation, but I knew little about the suffering and nothing about the humiliation. I was not a Good Friday kind of girl.

One of our treasures here at the Church of the Atonement is our beautiful Rood—the crucifix and statues high above our heads. On this day, when the church has been stripped of all of its beautiful things, this one remains. It is hard to see it, so far above our heads. Those of us on this side of it see only the shadows of the figures. But I can imagine the scene that the beautiful carvings represent. The dark wood is dappled, marked by nails, and blood, and the sign hanging over the suffering Body. I can imagine that garbage dump outside of Jerusalem. There, at the foot of the Cross, stand Mary, his mother, and Mary, his aunt, and Mary, his dear friend: three women who cherished him; three women who are so like every woman that they share the same, most common name. Everybody has a story that will break your heart.

Good Friday is a day of shattered images. We strip the church on Maundy Thursday, so we do not have our usual places to look. We do not have the flowers, or the candles, or the golden cross. We have only the images in the words we read—the suffering servant with *nothing in his appearance that we should desire him*; the ones become as lowly as the worms, forsaken by God, that we read about in the Psalm; the beaten man, carrying the humiliating instrument of his own execution through the jeering crowd. And of all the images, flashing in and out of our brains on this empty day, the most shattering one of all: the three women huddled at the foot of the Cross.

I cannot bear to think of those women enduring the public humiliation of the man that they love. But worse than that is the thought of Jesus' humiliation: not merely the torturous pain—but suffering the fate of a heinous criminal, given over by his own people to the cruel government that had overcome them—the shameful death of crucifixion, while his mother watched. I much prefer my Cross to be made out of gold, thank you very much. I want to dwell in the glory. I want to welcome the happy morning and hear the trumpet of salvation.

On Good Friday we read from John's gospel. Tradition tells us that John was the beloved disciple of Jesus. John was the disciple who stood at the foot of the Cross with those three women who loved him. When Jesus said to his mother, *Woman, here is your son*, and to John, *here is your mother*, he was giving those two a new relationship. Even in his humiliation and suffering, Jesus was the servant of the ones he loved. Even as he was dying, he was giving new life.

I was a lucky little girl, when I wore the Cross of gold around my neck and barely understood the suffering that it represented. There is plenty of suffering in the world and try as we might to keep it from our children, we all grow up to experience it, to a greater or lesser extent. And this year, the truth is, everybody has a story that will break your heart. In this year of heartbreak all over, it is harder than ever to think of Mary, the mother of Jesus on that dark Friday, as the soldiers lifted the sponge of vinegar to his dying lips.

We do not know how to identify the suffering servant of Isaiah, but we do know that even 700 years before Jesus was born to be God with us, the people of God suffered, and yet understood that there was more to life than just pain. They knew that everybody has a story that will break your heart. But they knew this too: God does not abandon us here with our broken

hearts. *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* cries the Psalmist—but a few verses later, he proclaims the answer: *You. . .took me out of the womb and kept me safe on my mother's breast.*

Jesus hung on the Cross. By any rational measure it was unjust. It was humiliating. It was physical torture. And his mother was watching. And even as he hung there, he gave new life to the ones he loved. Looking at his mother, he said, *Woman, here is your son* and to John, he said, *here is your mother*. And new life was born in that relationship. And from that time, John and Mary cared for one another. They took care of each other in the way that mothers and sons care for one another: the bore one another's pain and shared each other's joy.

On this second day of the week that we read and meditate on the Passion of Christ, we know the rest of this heart-breaking story. We know that death does not have the last word. We know the glory of Easter.

We Christians must be Good Friday people if we are to be Easter people. Jesus spent a life of service to others. It was service that did not count pain and suffering. It is not that there was not suffering—it was that the suffering did not prevent the love. If anything, the suffering allowed the love to grow. The suffering even attracted the love.

Sunday by Sunday, even in the midst of a pandemics of virus, racism, and violence, even when we cannot be together in the same room, we celebrate the presence of God in our lives. And so we gather however we can! Zoom and Facebook and YouTube. Newsletters and telephone calls and Cable Channel 15—we figure out how to touch one another, even when the doctors tell us to stand six feet apart, because we cannot celebrate the presence of God without one another.

Even on the Cross, Jesus told us how we could live with our broken hearts. Out of his suffering, out of his humiliation, he calls to us who stand at the foot of the Cross: Here is your child; here is your parent; here is your family. Love one another with the care of a child for a parent, with the care of a parent for a child, with the care of siblings who understand each other's sorrow. Love one another and live.