

God's Friday

Scripture

Mark 15:16–41 In this passage, Mark's Gospel reports the crucifixion of Jesus—the description of six fateful hours, from nine o'clock in the morning until three o'clock in the afternoon. This earliest of the four Gospels offers a sparse and powerful report of the death of Jesus. According to Mark, there is only one saying from the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Prayer

Dear God, today is Good Friday—God's Friday—a day of darkness and death over all the earth. We take our places silently beneath the cross of Jesus. His little band of followers is not here, except for a few women hiding in the shadows. Where are they, Lord? Where are we, as the darkness looms? Are we near or have we fled? We hear Jesus' distant cry of dereliction, and we are afraid. If he cannot feel your presence, how can we? Do not abandon us, Lord. In the deafening silence of Friday, we wait, not daring to hope. Amen.

Introduction

Good Friday. Why do we call this solemn day of crucifixion *good*? There are various theories. The term *Good Friday* may well come from Germany, where it was called *Gottes Freitag*, “God's Friday.” Over the years, in English it has become Good Friday. Perhaps there is a great truth here. The Friday of the cross is good, because it is God's. It was the day when God acted to bridge the chasm between divine goodness and human sin.

Mark's report begins early in the morning, about 6 A.M. Jesus is in the courtyard of the palace presumably built by the late Herod the Great. The officials are there, and Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator, is questioning Jesus. He is direct and to the point: “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus' response must have been

unsatisfying to Pilate: “You say so.” Pilate asks again, “Have you no answer?” Jesus’ response then is a deafening silence.

At this moment, Jesus is at a crossroads. Although history has portrayed Pilate as sympathetic at best and neutral at worst, the Roman authorities and their cronies are convinced that Jesus is dangerous to the peace of Rome and a popular insurrectionist who has come to announce the coming of a kingdom greater than Caesar’s. Pilate’s question, “Are you the King of the Jews?” is intentionally political—there is no king but Caesar. Jesus’ silence is interpreted as a guilty plea, and, according to Mark’s Gospel, he remains silent until the one cry Mark reports from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

The questioning of Jesus is followed by Pilate’s offering a choice to the bystanders. According to custom, a prisoner is to be freed at Passover. Pilate suggests he can free either Jesus or another prisoner, Jesus Barabbas, who had committed murder during an insurrection. Both are political prisoners. The only difference is that ironically Jesus of Nazareth had come in peace, while Jesus Barabbas had committed acts of violence. The people choose Barabbas, the man of violence. How often throughout history have humans chosen the way of violence over the way of peace?

From Nine to Noon

Jesus is led out to a place called Golgotha, the “place of the skull,” named for the skull-shaped rock that jutted out from the cliffs where Jerusalem is situated. According to Roman custom, he is made to carry the crossbar of the cross; the vertical post is already planted in the ground on Golgotha. Already weakened from torture, he becomes too weak to carry the heavy crossbeam. Thus, a man named Simon of Cyrene is compelled to carry the beam for Jesus.

At nine o’clock, Jesus is placed on the cross; the stage is set for a long, slow death. Soldiers cast lots for his clothing; he has already been stripped naked once, when his peasant garb was replaced by a purple cloak, while they mocked him as “King of the Jews.”

Mark writes that Jesus was not crucified alone; two bandits, one on either side, were crucified with him. These were no common thieves, as we sometimes assume, since crucifixion was reserved for dangerous enemies of Rome. Like Barabbas, they were probably insurrectionists, and their deaths, like Jesus’, were meant to be a public warning against defying the power of the empire. In Luke’s

Gospel, one thief is repentant, prompting Jesus' words, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." However, this is not reported by Mark.

Exactly what was happening on Calvary? In political terms, three more accused terrorists were being made into a public demonstration of the cost of threatening the power of Caesar. But more is going on here. For centuries, Christians have believed that the death of Jesus was the supreme act of reconciliation between God and humans, where Jesus died for our sins, effecting a cosmic act of forgiveness. The apostle Paul writes, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Through the death of Jesus Christ, God made a new covenant of forgiveness and reconciliation with us.

The great English preacher Leslie Weatherhead admitted that he struggled with the meaning of this. How, he asked, did the death of one man, in one place and time in history, make forgiveness possible in our lives? In a sermon he used the image of an erupting volcano—visible, even cataclysmic, occurring in a particular time and at a particular place in history. But the tremendous power that we see there is a demonstration of the power that exists in the earth's core all the time. Weatherhead came to see the crucifixion of Jesus as the supreme demonstration—in one time and place—of the greatest power of all: God's love and forgiveness, which is eternal.

Christians have struggled throughout history to explain what happened on Good Friday. There are many theologies of the cross and theories of Christ's atonement. However, no one theory is sufficient to describe the completeness of the event at the place of the skull. Perhaps the best explanation is the simplest: "For God so loved the world . . ." (John 3:16).

From Noon to Three

At high noon, according to Mark, "darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon." It seemed that all hope had fled—that the great dreams of Jesus' kingdom of God had turned to vapor in the heat of noonday.

Silence reigns. We should note the importance of silence in Holy Week. There is the silence of Wednesday, the day perhaps when Judas quietly made his deal with the authorities. There is also the silence of Saturday, the day after Good Friday, when there wasn't anything left to console Jesus' band of bereft disciples. We are reminded of Jesus' own saying on Palm Sunday, when the authorities demanded that his followers keep silence: "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out" (Luke 19:40). Perhaps in the silence from noon to three, had we been there, we might have heard the crying of the old stones of Jerusalem. Who knows?

At three o'clock, the silence is broken—by Jesus himself. There are no sayings from the cross in Mark's Gospel—no seven last words that have been the basis for many of our Good Friday services—only a prayer from Psalm 22, uttered with his last breath: "My God, my God, why have

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you forsaken me?" This beginning verse of the psalm held great meaning for the Jewish people. It tells the story of one who had suffered under a foreign power, who had come to a dark place where even the sense of God's presence had disappeared. It is the description of the suffering servant. The Jews often sang the Psalms. We might wonder if Jesus actually sang these words of dereliction, chanting words that expressed the apparent absence of God.

According to Mark, two important things happened immediately after the death of Jesus. First, "the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom." Here is an important symbol. Remember that the Jerusalem temple was designed as a series of concentric courts, and at its center was the Holy of Holies, the place where God dwelled. A curtain hung at the entrance of the Holy of Holies; the tearing of the curtain signifies that no longer will there be a separation between God and humanity. The chasm has been closed. From then on and forever, as Revelation expresses it, God will dwell with us (Revelation 21:3).

Second, there is the surprising statement by the Roman centurion: "Truly this man was God's Son!" There is great significance here, as it is the first time in Mark's Gospel a human affirms Jesus as the Son of God. How ironic that the words should come from a high-ranking Roman soldier! The title he applies to Jesus is the same one Caesar claims as his own. In Jesus' death, without a single act of violence and with none of the trappings of earthly power, he reveals himself as sovereign, even over the power of Caesar.

Finding the Cross

I hope you will permit the author a personal story. It was some years ago, on a dismal and rainy Good Friday. I was in my study at the First Presbyterian Church of York, Pennsylvania, preparing for the evening Tenebrae service where the gathering darkness is experienced through the denials and desertions of the disciples. I was thinking about a cross—not just any cross, but a particular cross. I had only heard about this cross from the congregation. It was a Celtic cross given to the church by its former pastor. Dr. Ernest Campbell had traveled in Scotland and bought the cross at the Iona community as a gift of gratitude to the congregation he loved. It was a beautiful cross, set in a block of Scottish granite.

Sadly, the cross had been lost. People talked about it, remembering how beautiful it was, but we had all looked high and low, to no avail. Somehow we had lost the cross, and the loss was on my mind on that rainy Friday morning.

I heard a knocking downstairs at the door of the church office building. Thinking it might be a delivery or a church member in need, I went down and answered the door. To my surprise, there stood one of our youth, soaking wet but wearing a broad smile. He was holding the cross—the cross that had been lost! Our youth group was spending the day cleaning out an old garage slated for demolition to expand the church's parking. There, in the rubble and refuse, they found the cross. And in the rainy gloom of a Good Friday!

Many times over the years I've thought of that day. Are we in danger of losing the cross? At a megachurch in the city where I live, there is a very large worship center where no cross is clearly on display. When a friend asked where the cross was, she was told that one could be found in the gift shop. How is it, that there is no cross where they worship?

Perhaps they have followed the advice of church growth experts who basically say no church that continues to preach the cross will grow because in today's American culture, we are more interested in success than in sacrifice. Contemporary wisdom advises us that the cross is a downer, and people won't be attracted to such images of death. If we are losing the cross, aren't we also losing sight of why hope is possible? Without that hope, we will forget why God's Friday is good.

The pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer described what he termed *cheap grace* in *The Cost of Discipleship*: “Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession. . . . Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”¹

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Spiritual Practice

Do an Internet search for various images of the cross, such as the Celtic cross with its circle symbolizing eternity, or the Orthodox cross with its extra crossbar, slanted upward in homage to the repentant thief. What is the message of each type of cross? What does each emphasize about the crucifixion?



Questions for Reflection

What difference does the crucifixion of Jesus make in your view of God? Why did Jesus have to die to bring about forgiveness?

Review the various theories of the atonement. Which of the traditional theories speak to you most meaningfully? Are there any that you question?

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller, rev. ed. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963), p. 47.