

Good Friday Reflections

Into the Darkness

Opening Prayer

It is hard, dear Lord, to imagine the realities behind the words we hear this morning.
The depths to which you were dragged defy our comprehension.
Yet these are the dynamics of your love,
the lengths to which you will go to reconcile us to the relationship with you
that nourishes us to flourish as the people you created us to be.
Open us afresh this morning to the workings of your love,
so we may sense, feel, know, and accept our restored role in your mission.

Reading & Reflection – John 18:1-14

Jesus knew it was coming.
You don't confront the powers of the day
with challenges to their legitimacy
the way Jesus did
and get away with it.

The garden, the betrayer,
the Roman soldiers, the temple guards, the disciples,
armed and tense,
a courageous step forward,
an impulsive attack,
a loving rebuke,
the arrest,
and the appearance before the religious authorities.

This is the darkness of detention and dread.

I have friends who have served and are serving as prison chaplains.
They deal with the dread of detention every day.
They talk about the despair and depression
prisoners experience.
They talk about the dread that arises
when faced with violence and death.
Prisons and judicial systems are dark places
for those under arrest and convicted.

Sustaining the light of the Gospel in dark places is hard.

Their resilience, and ours,
comes from knowing that Jesus Christ,
the One in whom God came to redeem us,
has been and still is there
with everyone who is in the dark of detention and dread.

Reading & Reflection - John 18:15-38a

The disciples denied and deserted Jesus.
Their dreams of messianic triumph were dashed.
They were filled with disappointment
and that led into denial –
for Peter, the supposedly strongest among them, three times.

The fright and the frenzy of the events
made them just want to get away,
go and hide until it all blew over.

Then the cock crew and Peter knew.
His disappointment had taken him deep into the darkness of denial.
His fear of association with the criminal,
with the One who had challenged the religious and political powers,
had led him to deny his relationship with Jesus,
to turn his back on his friend.

Perhaps he was caught up in his anger
at having been rebuked for defending Jesus in the garden.

Perhaps he was fearful for his own future.

Perhaps he was just confused.

Whatever the complex set of reasons,
he entered the darkness of denial and desertion.

Sustaining the light of the Gospel in dark places is hard.

Peter was dreadfully afraid of where all these events seemed to be leading.
He was disappointed that Jesus was not fighting harder against everything.
He was angry at Jesus' rebuke when he tried to defend him.
Why bother anymore?
Deny and desert.

How often do we deny and desert Jesus Christ
in dark situations that cry for a witness to the light of the Gospel?
More often than I'd like to admit in public.

But Jesus remains with us, ready to forgive and refresh.

Reading & Reflection - John 18:38b-19:30

Then there is the darkness of the death of God.

In ways that are too numerous and complex
to explore this morning,
this is the central scandal and foolishness of Christianity.
People stumble over it.
People reject it.

What kind of God is so weak and powerless
that this kind of darkness would be allowed to happen?
There's nothing here to worship.
It's just a bunch of crazy stories from deluded disciples.
It makes no sense to me.

But those willing to listen to and for God,
willing to let God be who God will be,
find a different wisdom here.

It is not the wisdom of might and power.
It is not the wisdom of retribution and revenge.
It is not the wisdom of sword and spear,
of guns and landmines and missiles.

It is the wisdom of a God who is with all those who suffer.
It is the wisdom of compassionate identification.
It is the wisdom of love and blessing.
It is the wisdom of care and companionship.

It is a wisdom that accepts darkness of death as a fact of life,
but does not allow that dreaded darkness to define life.
It is a wisdom that faces death constantly, but infuses it with the light of life.

Sustaining the light of the Gospel in dark places is hard.

We will be mocked, misunderstood, rejected, ignored, and ridiculed.
We will be tempted to compromise the Gospel,
to make it appealing and palatable to a secular world.

This is the day that sets us apart,
this Friday that is seen by Christians as good,
this Friday in which God endured
the deepest of the darkneses of this world – death itself.

On that original dark Friday, Jesus final words seem to capture it all –
“It is finished!”

Reading & Reflection - John 19:31-42

Then came the darkness of the tomb,
a place of decay and disintegration.

Jesus is prepared for burial according to Jewish customs
by loving disciples.

He is placed in the tomb,
covered with a fragrant mix of spices and wrapped in linen
to soften the process of decomposition.

Now it was truly finished!

The dread of death had triumphed.

The light of the Gospel was extinguished.

Denial, despair, and a deeper darkness took over.

It seems finished indeed!

But in the distance, just out of sight, something seems to be happening.

Something new seems to be brewing.

Is God up to something we can't imagine?

Is something unbelievably gracious about to happen?

I wonder.

I truly wonder.

Closing Prayer

And so we sit,

stunned by the terrifying trauma we have just heard.

There is a numbness that settles over our sensing, our feeling, and our thinking
as the gravity of what you endured from us and for us sinks in.

Is there any hope for your rebellious people,
any signs of your redemptive power at work in our world,
anything for us to get ready for?

We wonder.

We truly wonder.

Benediction

Know that even in the darkest depths of our lives
our crucified God does not abandon us to our own devices.

As Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
as the family of the Holy Trinity,

God continues to work within us and among us
to work out the wonders of his redemption through us.