

Good Friday 2021

Why did Jesus have to die? It's too often presented to the church that God was angry, and God had to punish someone for the sins of the world. We get a vision of God as stuck in judgment mode with no other options. And this portrait shows God as one who would choose to kill his own son rather than wipe out the human race. And again, as if those were the only choices.

Is that what the Bible means when it talks about Jesus as a sacrifice for sins? That God could only forgive people if they offered a sacrifice? And so, God made Jesus the sacrifice?

The practice of sacrifice was universal in the ancient world. It was a practice that existed a long time before God called Abraham. Everybody did it. They all sacrificed animals to their gods. The animals used for meat were first offered to God, and it was a way of treating animal life as sacred. Life belongs to God, it's not to be ended casually.

The sacrifice was also associated with feeding or appeasing the deity and as necessary for forgiveness. There are multiple places in the Old Testament where the idea that sacrifice feeds God is mocked. And other places, even in the Old Testament, where the idea that God requires sacrifice is challenged. Hebrews 9:22 said, "Indeed, under the law, almost everything is purified with blood and without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins." And yet, that contradicts other things that we have in scripture itself. After all, during the Babylonian exile, there was no temple. There was no place to offer sacrifice. And yet the prophets are quite explicit that God forgave the sins of the people. That beautiful passage from Isaiah, *Comfort my people, says your God. Declare that the warfare is over, that her sins are forgiven.* That was written during the Babylonian exile when there was no sacrifice.

And Jesus forgave sins during his ministry years before the crucifixion. Note today's reading from Hebrews: *sacrifices and offerings you (addressed to God) have not desired. In burnt offerings and sin offerings, you have taken no pleasure.*

So, if God didn't desire sacrifices, then who did? Who needed them? We did. We human beings did. We are the ones who have problems with forgiveness, who won't

forgive without shedding blood. When something goes wrong, we look for a scapegoat, for someone to blame. When we are hurt, we look for revenge. For someone to be punished. And some of us turn our hatred and anger toward others inward. And some of us can't forgive ourselves and so we keep hurting ourselves.

In today's readings from the Psalm and Isaiah, we see powerful portraits of people suffering and in pain. Tradition has interpreted them as being about Jesus. But the psalmist was probably writing about personal experiences. And the prophet was writing first and foremost about someone in his own time. The experiences described in these passages are awful, painful, shameful. But they are ordinary human experiences. Hundreds of thousands of people throughout the world are experiencing something similar right now. The last couple of days, the news has been full of reports about massacres of civilians in Ethiopia, about massacres of civilians in Myanmar. Millions of people throughout history have been despised and rejected by others, held of no account. Millions have been taken away by a perversion of justice. Isn't that what the trial of Derek Chauvin is about? A perversion of justice? And what's the question on everyone's mind? Will he be punished for it?

Six million Jews, God's own people, were exterminated because of human cruelty. And Christians bear some of the responsibility for that. Christians, those who called themselves by the name of Christ, actively participated in that slaughter. Supported it. And those who did not actively participate, stood by and allowed it.

The reading today, the Passion narrative, has been re-translated because Christians have a horrible history of holding Jews accountable for the death of Christ, of using Good Friday as a day to hear the story of the crucifixion, and then go and beat up and kill Jews.

I had a rabbi in seminary who told me that his entire community hid on Good Friday, because the Christians in his good southern town would go to the theater and watch King of Kings and then pour out looking for Jews to attack. So, suffering like what's described in the psalm and in Isaiah is not extraordinary. Even Jesus' crucifixion was not extraordinary. He was crucified between two other people. And in the Roman world, Jesus' cross was only one cross among thousands.

Jeanne, you posted today a poem. I already had my sermon entirely written, and then I went to the Facebook page and I saw the poem and I said, all right, I'm going to use it. It's a poem called "The Coming" by R.S. Thomas.

And God held in his hand
A small globe. Look he said.
The son looked. Far off,
As through water, he saw
A scorched land of fierce
Color. The light burned
There; crusted buildings
Cast their shadows: a bright
Serpent, A river
Uncoiled itself, radiant
With slime.
On a bare
Hill a bare tree saddened
The sky. many People
Held out their thin arms
To it, as though waiting
For a vanished April
To return to its crossed
Boughs. The son watched
Them. Let me go there, he said.

No. Jesus' crucifixion and suffering were not extraordinary. They were ordinary. And that's precisely the point.

Diana Butler Bass says the cross wasn't God's response to humanity's sin. It was humanity's response to God's love. Did God kill Gandhi for speaking the truth and calling for love? No. We did. Did God kill Martin Luther King Jr. for speaking the truth and calling for love? No. We did. In John, Jesus says that he came to testify to the truth. He preached God's way of love and justice. He called out the ways that we human beings shame and hurt and exclude each other. He spoke truth to power. And Power replied, "What is truth?" And handed him over to be crucified. The cross wasn't God's response to humanity's sin. It was humanity's response to God's love.

But God knows us, God knows our brokenness, our woundedness, our entrapment in hatred and fear. And so, God entered into our human experience and bore our brokenness. Instead of making us suffer for our violence, God suffered for us and with us. Instead of killing us for violating God's laws, God became flesh in Jesus and let us

kill him. "He was wounded for our transgressions; crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the punishment that made us whole. And by his bruises, we are healed."

Why are we healed by Christ's suffering? Because God's wrath was appeased? No. Because when God entered into our suffering and death, God transformed them. God refused to let violence and hatred have the last word. We punish. God forgives. We hate. God loves. We kill. God makes alive.

We killed Jesus. We killed God in Christ. But God turned death to life and mourning to dancing. There's a beautiful song, and if you'll bear with me, I'm going to sing a part of it for you.

I danced in the morning when the world was begun, and I danced in the moon and the stars and the sun, and I came down from heaven and I danced on the earth. At Bethlehem I had my birth. I danced on the Sabbath and I cured the lame. The Holy People said it was a shame. They whipped and they stripped, and they hung me high and left me there on the cross to die. They cut me down and I leapt up high. I am the life that'll never, never die. I'll live in you if you live in me, I am the Lord of the dance, said he. Dance then, wherever you may be, I am the Lord of the dance, said he, and I'll lead you all wherever you may be, and I'll lead you all in the dance said he.

May God in Christ help us to live in the power of the resurrection. May God teach us to walk in Jesus' way of obedience and love. May God lead us all in the dance. Amen.