

Good Friday  
Isaiah 52:13-53:12, Psalm 22, John 19:1-37  
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For all intents and purposes, today brings an end to a long Lenten season. Today is the dreaded day we have to get through to safely arrive at Easter. The writer W.H. Auden said, "Christmas and Easter can be subjects for poetry, but Good Friday, like Auschwitz, cannot. The reality is so horrible it is not surprising that people should have found it a stumbling block to faith."

Maybe you are asking yourself why you are here today. Why do we put ourselves through Jesus' agony over and over again each year? I was reading recently about how this day came to be called Good Friday, and the best explanation is that good, in this context, stands for holy. While we may all agree the benefits of Jesus' gruesome death are ultimately good for all humankind, there is little good about the story we just heard. Today is a holy Friday in that Jesus accepted all the degradation of the arrest, trial, condemnation and crucifixion in accordance with the Father's will.

While we prefer to celebrate the positive aspects of life like birthdays, anniversaries, victories and special accomplishments, the cross is certainly not in that category. Whereas, the former are happy occasions, the cross is sorrowful. While they tend to be light, surface events, the cross is heavy and deep. I think that is why the attendance on Good Friday is sparser especially compared to Easter Sunday.

We don't like death and understandably so. Yet death in small ways and big ways is an integral and necessary aspect of life. Some things we must die to such as childhood and adolescence so we can stride toward maturity, responsibility, independence and selflessness.

Only in death or occasions of loss and failure are we likely to be vulnerable and thus open to meet God and accept grace. When I am weak there is the potential for God to be strong in me. Yet, even so, most of us prefer to keep life simple and light so as not to lose control for a minute. Not long ago, I heard suffering defined as any time we are not in control. We resist suffering.

Today is Good Friday or Holy Friday because Jesus surrenders complete control of his life to his enemies. He accepts suffering. On the surface, what he does is utterly frightening and ludicrous to us. The deep mystery and paradox of this day is that Jesus is also placing his life completely in the hands of the God he is devoted to. The cross is an act of insanity at one level and is utterly dauntless and gutsy at another level.

What will be the outcome? How does our faith compare to that of Jesus?

Of all the four gospels, John's version presents a Jesus who is never in doubt and hardly in agony. John leaves out the Garden of Gethsemane, where in Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus prays three times with tears that the cross might be avoided. Furthermore, on the cross, John's Jesus doesn't wonder if his God has abandoned him with a gut-wrenching cry in his hour of deepest pain and alienation.

On the other hand, only John has some human companionship for Jesus in his time of agony. In a scene from the movie *Dead Man Walking*, a true story, Sister Helen Prejean, a Roman Catholic nun, is helping a prisoner on death row prepare to die. Toward the end, she tells him that when he is strapped to the chair, injected with the lethal solution and waiting to die, he should look at her face. She says, "That way the last thing you will see before you die will be the face of someone who loves you."

In John, we heard that several people whom Jesus loved and who loved him are standing nearby, beneath the cross, including his mother, Mary Magdalene and the unnamed disciple. (We presume that it is John himself.) It must have helped and comforted Jesus that the last thing he saw before he died was a small group of people who sincerely loved him.

Maybe we are here today because we don't want Jesus to die alone. We want him to know that we love and stand by him in his darkest hour, and we are grateful for his death, even if we don't completely understand what it all means.

Jesus' death was meant, in part if not entirely, to end divisions and strife and bring disparate people together in peace and mutual acceptance. The best thing we can do as we leave today is recommit ourselves to the work of peacemaking and reconciliation. As best as we are able, let's not let anyone live or die without their knowing that someone loves them. That would make Jesus' death and our lives very worthwhile. AMEN.