

Epworth Chapel on the Green
April 18, 2014
Good Friday
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 52:13-53:12
Psalm 22
Hebrews 10:1-25
John 19:1-37

As early as the first century, Christians saw in tonight's Old Testament text from Isaiah a prophecy of Jesus' suffering and death. This text helped the early church to better understand and communicate Jesus' death.

Similarly, the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews asks his readers, and us, to meditate and reflect on Christ's *sufferings*, because his suffering reflects his identification with sinful humanity.

The picture that emerges from these two passages, especially the Isaiah text, is a picture with which most of us are not comfortable, if we were to be honest. For it reveals to us that the power of God is most fully demonstrated through human weakness and pain.

If I am to be totally honest tonight, I would confess to you that I am somewhat uncomfortable with a God who shows his power chiefly through human weakness and suffering. To be honest with you, there is a part of me that would prefer that God demonstrate his power by throwing his weight around and taking matters in hand.

Noted scholar and preacher Marva Dawn captures some of what I feel when she says:

*Why are we so unwilling to have our Liberator suffer?...Perhaps... because we want a victorious deity in control of culture and of the circumstances of our lives. We have trouble accepting a Messiah who chooses to be a Suffering Servant; we really want a Savior who rescues us completely out of all our messes and makes everything come out totally right...Especially we don't want a persecuted Redeemer because that means that following Jesus will involve us, too, in adversities. We really don't want to pay the price of loving our neighbors, much less loving our enemies. We'd rather wield violence than absorb it into ourselves. We are thoroughly noninterested in the kind of complete self-donation that Jesus exhibited. ["Behold! It Came to Pass" *Journal for Preachers* 28:3, pp. 17-18]*

And yet, here we are on Good Friday -- the day when we are confronted face to face with the Cross. The day when we see most profoundly that God reveals his saving power through weakness and suffering. The day when we see again the truth that, rather than wield violence, God absorbs it into Godself.

Years ago a young boy was working with his father in the textile mills of South Carolina. One day the boy's clothing was caught in the heavy machinery and began slowly pulling him toward certain death. His father saw what was happening, but couldn't get to the control room in time to shut down the power to the machinery. He seized up the situation, and then placed his own arm in the cogwheels to jam the machinery. His son was saved, but the father later died of infection to his severed arm.

As he grew up, and for the rest of his life, this young boy wore a red band around his arm. When people asked him why, he replied, “this is the mark of my father upon me. It reminds me that I have been died for.”

This day, and the cross which occupies center stage on this day, is a reminder to us that we have been died for. As G.K. Chesterton said, “that terrible tree which is the death of God is the life of humanity!”

I confess that I still have moments when I’d prefer that God would swoop down on this broken down world and throw His weight around, and really take matters in hand. But that’s not God’s way. At least not just yet. God’s way of dealing with the murderous and violent places that lie within each of us is to take that pain into Himself. God heals the pain through suffering love, not violence.

Theologian Douglas John Hall says it like this:

The Cross is our Christian reality check, and unlike a lot of other religious symbols the cross doesn’t lie about reality...It says, “Look! There is a great deal that is simply wrong with this world! Innocent people suffer, and many guilty ones prosper. Look at all that injustice, that war, that degradation of nature, and death! Don’t turn away from it. Religion may tempt you to shut your eyes and just ‘enjoy,’ but faith wants you to open them. Until you do that, you’ll never be in a position to understand the pain of God -- or God’s way of healing pain, either.

On this most holy day, let us not run from this truth, nor deny it, but embrace it. Let us find in it the power to help us in our own hardship, adversity, and suffering. Let us find with the Apostle Paul the words to say: “*God forbid that I*

should boast about anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of that cross, my interest in the world died long ago, and the world's interest in me is also long dead.” (Gal. 6:14)

As we travel deep into the heart of the Paschal mystery, let us give thanks for the cross. And let us pray for grace to live as those whose lives fall constantly under its shadow.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.