God is a Giver

Isaiah 52:13-53:12; John 18:1-19:42
Christ Trinity Lutheran Church
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I want to begin by thanking Rev. Olivier for the invitation to join you for Good Friday worship.

I also want to apologize in advance for my voice. I have been fighting a cold since Monday, but with the help of God (and Benylin) I hope to get through the next fifteen minutes or so. ☺

For two thousand+ years, people have been trying to explain what happened on the cross.

For two thousand+ years, writers and theologians and biblical scholars have sacrificed forests of trees in attempts to explain exactly what happened on that awful Friday so many years ago.

We have many ideas—each with some measure of biblical support.

- the cross was Jesus taking the penalty that our sin deserved
- the cross was where God, in Christ, delivered the decisive blow to evil, to death, and to the devil—where Christ was victorious over all that holds creation captive
- the cross was the supreme example of self-sacrifice for us to follow
- the cross is a powerful demonstration of God's solidarity with the victims of our world, with the poor and the oppressed and the marginalized; it is God himself as victim

I have half a shelf of books in my office devoted to figuring out which of these

metaphors or which combination of metaphors most accurately describes what was going on that first Good Friday.

Which ones deserve to be emphasized? How should we calibrate our understanding? What does one have to believe about this cross in order to properly understand Good Friday and to be a faithful Christian?

I think that the best place to begin is simply to acknowledge that the execution of Jesus of Nazareth on a Roman cross, and the role this plays in the salvation and healing of the world, and the establishing of God's kingdom is a deep and profound mystery—a mystery whose depths we will never fully plumb.

The best place to begin is simply with reverence and awe at the sight of the creator of the universe, in Christ, willingly subjecting himself to a barbaric execution at the hands of the very human beings who were created to reflect the divine image.

And to sit with the mystery of, as Thomas Yoder Neufeld puts it,

> how it could possibly be that the scene of humanity's worst crime could also be the moment of God's reconciling embrace of precisely that hostile humanity.

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This morning I want us to resist the urge to explain and apply the cross—at least for a while.

I want us to focus less on what the cross accomplishes than simply looking on this event as a human story.

Before any of the theorizing and theologizing about what the cross means for us, we should remember that it is part of the story of a human life, a particular story, in the context of a particular people and a particular hope.

So often, I think, particularly in the North American Christian context, we are guilty of viewing the cross as the outworking of some kind of abstract theology that describes why the cross was "necessary" and how it "works," how it moves human

beings from the “guilty” to the “not guilty” column in God’s ledger.

So many presentations of the cross leave one with the impression that it would have been sufficient if any kind of divine-human hybrid being would have died (it doesn’t really matter where or when) in order to kick start the mechanism whereby human sin could be judged, where we could be offered forgiveness and salvation.

All of that other stuff about Jesus becomes almost incidental.

Sure, it’s interesting that he was born in the first century, that he was a member of the Jewish people, that he did some miracles, and taught some cool things, but all of this is kind of secondary to the really important thing: the cross.

This is where the important spiritual things take place.

We have images of the eternal Son of God, the second member of the Trinity, the risen and exalted Lord in our heads as we see Jesus on the cross, but we forget that he was also a son, a brother, a friend.

Jesus was fully God and fully human, according to the great creeds of the church. We sometimes forget the fully human part.

I would like us to dwell just a bit with the human tragedy of this story.

I would like us to think not of the divinely-authored, salvation-accomplishing, prophecy-fulfilling story of Jesus’ death, but of the human story behind those awful events that took place outside Jerusalem two thousand or so Fridays ago.

I want us to think about all the political manipulation, all the religious groping and grasping after power and status, of the human betrayal.

I want us to think of how this Jesus must have seemed not to postmodern westerners like us, but to his first-century contemporaries…

Not the second person of the Trinity or our “Lord and Saviour,” but an enigmatic revolutionary, a strangely compelling religious teacher who threatened the powers and structures and institutions of his day.

I want us to think of a very sad and a very bad story—of a young man wrongfully accused, falsely tried and convicted… of a horrific and barbaric execution…

I want us to think about a brokenhearted mother and a son gone too soon… about confused and shattered disciples of another failed Messiah… of a beleaguered, harassed, confused group of occupied people who were caught between the oppression of the Roman Empire and the hope of their people that was never supposed to turn out this way...

I want us to dwell with the sadness and the badness of this human story before we ever move on to what is all accomplished.

[Pause.]

But after doing this, I also want us to ask the question: What do these strange events and this sad story have to do with me? With us?

The fact that we affix the adjective "good" to this Friday could surely be seen as among the more perverse ironies of history.

These events are not "good," in any normal sense of the word, even for those who have an eye toward the Sunday that is coming.

Yet Christians still stubbornly call this day "Good Friday." Why?

Perhaps because from that terrible first Friday down to today, there has always been a sense that there is more to the story than the sadness and the badness that we see on the human level.

There has always been a sense that, while the story of Jesus' last hours is a profoundly human story, it is much more than this as well.

However partially we understand or embrace it, we are convinced that the God of the universe was somehow at work amidst all of this tragedy and evil and apathy and betrayal and confusion and injustice and emptiness and despair.

The Christian conviction has always been that the story of the execution of a young Jewish rabbi by the collusion of religion and Empire is only part of the story—that

behind these events, God was at work judging and paying the price for human sin and rebellion, demonstrating the scope of divine love, forgiving those who didn't know what they were doing, and reconciling all things to himself.

The Christian conviction has always been that this Friday changed things.

Big things. Cosmic things.

Historical and social things.

Spiritual and personal things.

Somehow, this death was a turning point in history. Somehow this death has echoed down through the ages.

There is so much that we don't understand about this death.

We so often confidently proclaim what this or that meant, why the cross had to happen, what it precisely accomplished, why God "had" to do it this way, what this all means for us and what we should do about it.

We use impressive, theological words to describe it in order to keep the story manageable and safe, to make it look like we know what we're talking about, to make it seem like God is as rational as we are, to make it seem like the cross is the result of a logical equation.

But it wasn't. And it isn't.

The truth is that the horrible execution story we remember today is a story cloaked in mystery at every turn.

Glorious, frightful, beautiful, God-awful mystery.

And yet, we are convinced, in the core of our beings, that this Friday mystery is a hopeful one, and that the God behind these mysterious events is a generous, merciful, self-emptying God.

We are convinced that this mystery does, indeed, have something—everything,

actually—to do with us, all these years later.

We may understand less than we think we do about the cross of Christ, but we understand enough to know that the badness and sadness of our stories is bound up with the badness and sadness of that first awful Friday.

And we know that somehow the cross is part of God doing something for the badness and the sadness that we could never do for ourselves—that the cross is not *just* a scene of injustice and suffering but also, incredibly, of the greatest VICTORY the world has ever known.

That's why we call this Friday "good."

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Good Friday's cross shows us two things:

1. **The weight of human sin**.

The cross locates *us* as contributors to the brokenness of the world—not in a generic, comfortably abstract kind of way as is so often the case when we talk about "human sin," but in a personal one.

2. **The lengths that God will go to in order to mend the broken relationship between God and his creation**.

Jesus loves me, this I know. The cross tells me so.

How do we respond?

We come, we confess, we accept, we receive from this God.

We don't try to earn, because this is the kind of sacrifice that could never be earned.

We don't try to justify or rationalize.

We don't convince ourselves that we must now try to emulate Jesus in his suffering.

The cross not a transaction or a deal to accept. It is a gift.

I close with a quote from Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf:

> God hanging on the cross for the salvation of the world is not a negotiating God. On the cross, God is not setting up the terms of a contract that humanity needs to fulfill. God isn't saying: "I died for you, now you've got to do what I tell you to do." Instead, God is giving God's own self so that humanity may have life, and life abundant. God is not a negotiator. God is a giver.

God is a giver.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.