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John 19:13-30

A Cross in the Heart of God

Good Friday is not a day for the squeamish.

John narrates the events in short order: the trial before Pilate; the decision of the crowd; Jesus carrying the cross to Golgotha; the crucifixion itself; darkness covering the earth. The gospel of John does not offer the gory details of the crucifixion, though John's first readers would have had no trouble imagining the nails being driven into the wrists and then the feet, the hours of bleeding and hunger, the slow asphyxiation as the lungs begin to close, the sweat and blood pouring off the condemned as the body temperature rises with every struggling breath. Crucifixion was more than a means of death it was a weapon of terror, exactly designed by the Romans to produce the greatest amount of lasting pain over the course of a slow and degrading death. An inscription is written above Jesus' head, written in three languages, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, so the point will be lost on no one in cosmopolitan Jerusalem – the King of the Jews – a mockery, a final nail in the spirit, an embarrassment and humiliation, a king, dying the death of a common criminal. The soldiers take his clothes and divide them. A handful of brave disciples, his mother among them, remain at the foot of the cross. A few final thirsty words end the drama – and then there is cold, dark, death.

On Good Friday the church asks us to take a good hard look at the violence and meanness of the world and the bloodiness of the cross, and God on the cross. The same God who spoke to Abraham and Sarah, who called to Moses from the burning bush, who rescued Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the Fiery furnace, who led his people out of slavery and into the promised land, and who in Jesus Christ proclaimed good news to the poor, released the captives, and bound up the broken-hearted.

The account of Jesus' trial and crucifixion is commonly referred to as his passion. Often we think of the passion as the suffering and death of our Lord. And indeed in this passion we see the cross in the heart of God, the suffering God who in Jesus Christ has become captive and broken-hearted, God's heart torn between the folly of human sin and frailty, and God's unquenchable desire for his creation.

Good Friday is a story of individual sin, betrayal, and abandonment, those of the priests, Pilate, the soldiers, the blood-thirsty crowds, Peter, Judas, the other disciples, of you and me. But Good Friday is bigger than the individual character of sin. It is the story of God's unending love for God's broken world, a broken world full of senseless evil and violence, a world where the good die young and the old grow lonely, a world of wars and cancer, of corruption and pollution, a world where so often there is little reason to hope or dream.

The word passion is usually thought of in terms of God's suffering. But there is another way to think of passion, another use of the word, and that is connected to God's love. God's love is patient and kind and passionate. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things to the end. Love does not go gently into that

good night. On Good Friday God's heart is torn between the passion of sin-induced suffering and the passion of grace-filled love.

On the cross Jesus refuses to give in to the meanness and arrogance that surround him. In the face of evil and despair the passion of his loving remains. To the cries for blood from the crowd he doesn't respond. From the clubs and whips that beat him he refuses to fight back. To Peter he utters the command to lay down the sword. To the soldiers who have torn his body to shreds he offers forgiveness. To the thief he whispers the hope of paradise. To the grieving disciples and his broken-hearted mother he offers a few words of comfort. On the cross the passion of Jesus' suffering is surpassed only by the passion of his love. Only the tenacity of God's loving is greater than the tenacity of humanity's sin. In the heart of God there is a cross . . . and on that cross God shows the fire of his love, a fire that the cold darkness of sin and death will never overcome.

Just before he bows his head and gives up his spirit, Jesus offers two final words: "I thirst." In these words of Jesus, "I thirst," we see the whole of the gospel of John. In the gospel of John Jesus is the one for whom we thirst. He is the one who turns water into wine at the wedding of Cana. He is the one who becomes the water of life for the Samaritan woman at the well. He is the one who heals the blind man by washing him in the pool at Jerusalem. He is the one who offers his very blood to quench the thirst of his disciples at the last supper. He is the living water that will never run out. And now in his dying words Jesus says, "I thirst." Throughout the gospel up until this point the implication is that we, the disciples, the crowds, the politicians, the outcasts are all thirsty for him. In his final words, Jesus turns the story around, and says he is thirsty for us. In these two words God is saying to those at the foot of the cross, to those same disciples in their grief and faithfulness, to those same soldiers executing the torture of the state, to the chief priests protecting their political interests, to Pilate saving face, to you and me, to the whole of the cosmos, Jesus says, "I thirst for you." In the beginning of the gospel he turns water into wine, suggesting that he is the good wine that will never run out. And now at the end, the soldiers offer him sour wine as an act of mercy as water and blood mingle down from his body. He drinks, yet Jesus' thirst is not for wine. His thirst is to do the will of the one who sent him, and that will is love. On the cross Jesus is the thirsty, unquenchable, passionate love of God for all of us.

This is the faithful one who lays down his life for his friends, the good shepherd who will never stop searching for the lost sheep, the living water of our baptism, and the one who will carry us through the stormy waters and deliver us to the far banks of the Jordan. Through the sweat and blood, the thorns and nails, the mockery and humiliation, the burning fire of God's love in Jesus Christ remains.

After tasting the sour wine, he says, "It is finished." All goes black, and darkness covers the whole earth.

No Country for Old Men is a chilling movie. Set in the late 1970's in the hardscrabble ranchlands of West Texas, it is violent, bloody, and murderous. The message is clear: there is great meanness in the world, such deep evil, so incomprehensible, so senseless, that it renders one speechless by its horror. It is not a movie for the squeamish. At the end of the film, an old small-town sheriff, played by Tommy Lee Jones, nears the end of his life. He struggles to extract some value from the senseless violence he has seen throughout his career, and through his father, and grandfather, and his father before him, all West Texas law-men who witnessed the deaths

of so many innocents, and had their noses rubbed in the shrapnel of so many broken and shattered lives. In the last scene the old sheriff has a dream, and he dreams of his father long since dead, and he tells the dream like this:

“I'm older now than my father ever was by twenty years. So in a sense he's the younger man. Anyway, it was like we was both back in older times and I was on horseback goin' through the mountains of a night. Goin' through this pass in the mountains. It was cold and there was snow on the ground and my father rode past me and kept on goin'. Never said nothin' goin' by. He just rode on past... and he had his blanket wrapped around him and his head down and when he rode past I seen he was carryin' fire in a horn the way people used to do and I could see the horn from the light inside of it. 'Bout the color of the moon. And in the dream I knew that he was goin' on ahead and he was fixin' to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold, and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there waiting for me.”

On Good Friday Jesus goes on ahead of us, into the dark and the cold of death, and there he makes a fire, a fire of Easter light, and he'll be there, waiting for us.