

We Are Here

Sermon: Good Friday

March 25, 2016

St. Stephen's Belvedere
The Rev. Wendy D. Cliff

[Isaiah 52:13-53:12](#)
[Psalm 22](#)
[Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9](#)
[John 18:1-19:42](#)

Jesus, what can I say to you today? What can all of us say to you, today? I admit that every time I hear the story of your death, a small part of me thinks maybe this time it won't happen. As the story is read, I think maybe there's still time for you to come up with another way to fulfill your mission, or for someone in the crowd to be brave enough to stop the madness, or for Pilate to realize that the truth was standing right in front of him. Please God, make this scene turn out differently. Jesus, I love you so much, the depth with which I can't comprehend your death causes me to hold onto this momentary fantasy.

But this is the day when we try to hear your story without knowing how it ends. We're asked to sit with your crucifixion without the knowledge of resurrection. We stand with the disciples and women and criminals and soldiers and remember the betrayals and beatings. We visualize the thorns, the whips, and fists and spit. We imagine torn flesh, pools of blood, exposed and strained limbs. Your life ends. It is finished. I stand here feeling the weight, the deep, desperate sadness of your suffering and death, and I am overcome with grief.

Why did all your followers turn on you? Why did one of your closest friends betray you? Why did your best friend pretend he didn't even know you? And why didn't laws protect you? On some level, I may not like it, but I understand how those things happened because we've all had friends, family members, and legal systems do those same things to us. And we've seen it happen to black and brown people, other Christians and Muslims, immigrants, and the poor.

But what I really can't grasp is why God, your father, the source of all power and creation allowed or maybe even chose to let you be tortured and die? And you? If you really are God, too, why didn't you prevent this from happening? Why couldn't you have died peacefully as an old man and still resurrected from the dead? And the scariest thing for me to contemplate is if you really are God, how can God die? How can the source of life and love and healing die? Why would this have to happen?

Some people say this happened because you had to be the ultimate blood sacrifice to God so that no other sacrifices ever need to happen again. Others say you died this way to offer a model of complete self-giving love, or that you were exposing human sin in the very act of being killed by humans in hopes that we would stop perpetuating violence. Or you've been described as a scapegoat who takes all our sins on your back and takes our punishment for us. Then there's the story about you doing battle with the Devil, and tricking him to release us back to God. And there's the belief that I often turn to that says you died like this to demonstrate that God stands in solidarity with everyone who suffers, especially in our most painful and horrific moments.

All of these and more are explanations about your death that make sense on some days and for some situations I've encountered. I mean, isn't it better to think that God wanted your death to happen so I could at least believe God is in control versus thinking God is absent or has no say in the way things unfold? But at other times, some of these explanations feel offensive and completely contrary to what I believe about you, about God. No parent ever, ever wants their child to suffer or die. The deaths of innocent victims like those in Brussels this week can never be part of God's plan, can they?

But I do believe the answer is here. Here in your cross, here among your gathered people, and even here deep in my heart. Something in my body understands your death, even though I can't explain it. It's why I think we're all gathered here today. I know this story of your death is for me and for each one of us. But it's not a story for our minds or intellect. It's a story for our hearts and our bodies.

Jesus, we're holding nails today. These are concrete reminders of your gruesome death. Our hands can feel the heavy, sharp, cold, hard spikes. Our bodies viscerally feel the impact of these instruments of torture and death on our hands and feet. We can feel their weighted power to inflict harm, to pierce flesh, to draw blood. In a few minutes, we will bring them to the foot of your cross. They will mean something

different to each one of us, but for everyone, they will be a tangible way to approach the cross, to step deeper into the mystery of your traumatic death.

Some of us might offer a nail as a symbol of our sins – all the ways we have turned against you and our neighbors in thought, word, or deed. Some of us might place a nail in front of your cross as a sign of gratitude for the ultimate sacrifice you made for us. Some of us might give you a nail in hopes that you will take some burden from our hearts. And some of us will simply offer you a nail because we don't know what else to do in the face of such sadness.

But what's important today is that we are here. We've had the courage to witness your death. You've given us the faith to witness your death. We will approach your cross with aching hearts and open, maybe crying eyes, but we are here. Yearning to know you better, yearning to understand what your death means for each of us, yearning to find comfort in your presence, and asking you to stay with us when we suffer and die, too.

Jesus, we love you, we grieve your death, and we are here for you, just as you are here for us.

Amen.