

Stephen R. Shaver
Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA
April 15, 2022
Good Friday, All Years, Revised Common Lectionary
Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12
Psalm 22
Hebrews 10:16-25
John 18:1-19:42

[sermon from 2019, lightly updated, in lieu of Deacon Pamela who was scheduled to preach and is sick today]

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Why are we here today?

Are we here to remember the political execution of a small-time failed messiah, a man who got in the way of efficient government and reasonable religion and ended up crushed between the gears of power?

Or are we here to celebrate the redemption of the world by its creator and Lord?

We are here today to do both; here at the center of the cross, where the horizontal and vertical meet; where a very human story of suffering is also God's story.

It's full of betrayal, misunderstanding, false accusations, cynical rulers. It ends with a man nailed up on wooden planks and left by the side of the highway into town to die as an example for those who would challenge the powers that be. The small handful of people who love him are crushed, of course. Yet for the majority of the world, what meaning does all this hold? Not much, really. Life goes on as it always does. Politics and executions are nothing new. It's a shame, but what can you do?

And yet two millennia later here we are. We claim that this Triduum is the key to interpreting all of life. It is the hinge around which history rotates, the moment into which the whole story of life is distilled. This is the time when an instrument of shame and death becomes the means of life and glory.¹ This is the time when the church looks at the cross in the light of the resurrection of Jesus and suddenly sees

¹ Collect for Tuesday in Holy Week, *Book of Common Prayer*, 220.

the meaning that was there all along: that in the cross of Jesus, in Jesus' love in the face of suffering and evil, we see the character of God.

There is a certain stream of Christian piety that tends to suggest that Jesus's death was somehow worse than any other death in history, that he suffered more, if it is even possible to quantify suffering. That model rests on the idea that Jesus' suffering is a direct payment for the sins of the world. It's an accounting model, tit for tat: since Jesus is taking on all the sins of humanity in our place, he must have received the sum total of all that suffering in one fell swoop.

But this is not the kind of God the scriptures show us. The God of Jesus Christ is not the God of torture and violence. God is the lover of mercy and forgiveness. It is not God who killed Jesus. Nor is it the Jews, as some readings of John's gospel might suggest—the Jewish Christians in the community that produced that gospel would have shrunk back in revulsion from the anti-Judaism their text has been used to justify through the centuries as Christians themselves have been all too ready to wield those gears of power and to become perpetrators of the same violence and torture.

The fact is that the crucifixion of Jesus is all too common and all too human a story. Jesus was one of perhaps hundreds of criminals executed that day alone in the Roman Empire and various other empires around the globe. And how many millions over time have suffered pain and death as Jesus did: anonymously; unfairly, but unspectacularly; as far as anyone could tell, pointlessly. There is a terrifying, impersonal randomness to the suffering that characterizes our existence: both the kind we inflict on one another and the kind that seems to happen for no reason at all. The victims of war in Ukraine, in Ethiopia, in Myanmar, in Yemen, in Afghanistan; those killed in acts of gun violence; those abused by their own loved ones; victims of car accidents, hurricanes, tsunamis; none of these people choose to suffer, and there is no apparent reason why they are the ones who do.

And although not all of us will be victims of such spectacular tragedy, all of us will be touched by some form of suffering that's unfair and unexpected. It might come in the illness of a loved one, the hopelessness of depression, the gnawing anxiety of poverty, or the loss of a friend. To suffer is to be human—to live in this beloved world which is God's good creation and yet which is under the bondage of evil, sin, and death.

Where is the good news in all this?

There would be none, except that what we do today does not stand on its own. Today we commemorate the cross and the tomb. But this liturgy does not end tonight. It began yesterday and continues tomorrow, when we will gather in darkness and light to wait for the proclamation that Christ is risen. That resurrection is foregrounded tomorrow—but it is present here today in mystery. What we are doing today is not a passion play. We don't come to Good Friday each year with recurring amnesia, as if we had to forget about the resurrection in order to celebrate the cross. On the contrary: it's only in light of the resurrection that there is anything worth celebrating about the cross.

In that light we can look back at the cross and find in it what John the evangelist finds: glory. A meaningless waste is now proof that God is present with us: even in bleakest darkness. Jesus, Emmanuel, came as God with us and lived our life firsthand, with all its joy, but also with the futility of suffering, the banality of evil, and the heartbreak of loss. Such is the humility of God.

We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you: because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.