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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Friday, April 7, 2023

Good Friday, All Years, Revised Common Lectionary

[Isaiah 52:13-53:12](#)

[Psalm 22:1-11](#)

[Hebrews 10:16-25](#)

[John 18:1-19:42](#)

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No tree chooses its own destiny.

Some trees are made into toys, or tables, or tools. Some are made into houses. A hundred and fifty years ago two redwood trees from a forest somewhere not too far from here were cut down and sawn into the boards that make up the walls of this house of prayer.

Some trees have an uglier destiny. There was a black locust tree in the Rural Cemetery here in Santa Rosa that became infamous as a lynching tree. It happened back in 1920 when an armed mob broke into the Sonoma County jail to haul out three gangsters who had shot dead the Sonoma County sheriff and two San Francisco policemen. After the vigilante hanging the tree became a morbid tourist attraction until a few years later it was cut down.

No tree chooses its own destiny. But because they are tall and visible, trees are often pressed into service by human beings when we choose to hurt and kill one another in public ways. Billie Holiday famously sang of the “strange fruit” hanging from Southern trees, the bodies of Black men who were similarly lynched not for shooting police but for striking for better wages or looking at a white woman or simply for no reason at all. Of course trees have been used not just by mobs but also by governments, for as far back as we have written records. The book of Deuteronomy has instructions for taking down the bodies of criminals who have been hanged. “You must take down the bodies that same day, so as not to defile the land,” it says, “for cursed is anyone who hangs on a tree.”

If you want to hold a public execution in a place where there’s no convenient tree growing, say a rocky and bare hill just outside a city, you have to build your own tree. And that is how the cross was invented. A couple of boards knocked together into a simple, crude, but very effective instrument, equal parts gallows and billboard, which says simply: don’t do what this person did, or the same thing might happen to you. An instrument of power and coercion, an instrument of social control, used by people in power with something to fear if those they are oppressing should ever rise up.

No tree chooses its own destiny. One tree might be made into a chair, another into a manger, another into a cross.

And of all the crosses used by Greeks and Persians and Romans and others to crucify however many thousands of public examples through the centuries, this one is the one we venerate today. Not the actual cross, of course. The cross we will bring forward in a few moments was made right here by one of our parishioners, not as an instrument of violence but as a symbol of salvation and an aid to prayer. But it stands in for one twenty centuries ago that was the same as all the others, and had the same gruesome fate, except for the One whom it held.

“Faithful cross, above all other; one and only noble tree; none in foliage, none in blossom, none in fruit thy peer may be.” We will sing those words in a few minutes. Here is Jesus in his glory, enthroned not on a golden seat but on a simple wooden cross. It was this he meant when he said, “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.” He came to us as Life itself. He lived among us as integrity, as joy, as freedom, as love. And because integrity and joy and freedom and love are magnetic and irresistible, he drew people to himself. And because integrity and joy and freedom and love are also dangerous, he became a threat to the established order of things; a threat to which those in authority, the Roman governing class and their local collaborators, responded in the customary and very, very human way.

It was Jesus’ faithfulness that led him to the cross. It was his love for God and his love for us. He willingly took on the fate that so many of his human siblings have endured; a fate of public ridicule and public death. The evil of this world had its way with him as it has with so many.

But he was Life. And on this cross Life faced death squarely. And though it was invisible to anyone watching with mere human eyes, a victory was won on that cross; a victory that would begin to shine forth a few days later to a few of those who loved him, and has continued to shine forth as he has continued to draw people to himself, including you, including me.

If you go to the church of St. Clement in Rome you will see a stunning mosaic behind the altar. In the center is Jesus on the cross, crucified. But the cross is covered with doves, signs of the Holy Spirit. And from the base of this cross grows a great green plant, its branches spiraling out in every direction, covering the wall with luxuriant growth. This, cross, then, is not just dead wood but a living tree. And as its vines burst out in every direction we see in them birds and animals, deer and peacocks and every kind of creature, and people as well of every kind: monks and farmers, shepherds and peasants and nobles, women and men. Four small rivers nourish it: the rivers from the book of Genesis that flowed into the Garden of Eden. This tree, then, is not just any tree, but the Tree of Life.

May it be so for us too, who find in this death, in this life, the source of our own.