

Sermon Good Friday 2011
Isaiah 52:13-53:12
Hebrews 10:16-25
John 18:1-19:42
Psalm 22
Bill Watson

During Lent, I have been reading a book by Leo Babauta entitled, *The Power of Less*. In his book, Babauta, encourages the reader to focus each day on the priorities of the day. He encourages us to narrow our perspective, to dare to limit what we focus on. Paradoxically we find that we can accomplish more by being focused on just a few vital elements rather than being pulled constantly in many directions. Such are the challenges of modern life. As the psalmist says, “This is the day that the Lord has made, we will rejoice and be glad in it.” This is the day that the Lord has made. This is the day to act within. This is the day we are given and the only day we are assured of.

Books such as Babauta’s suggest that many of us fritter our lives away frequently unable to actually complete any one task because so much distracts us. Or we find ourselves looking forward to some future event. Rather than focusing upon today, we look ahead. We anticipate the end of the work day, the coming weekend when we will be off, the next three day weekend, Spring break, a vacation or reunion. If we are children, we dream of turning 16 and dating and driving, if we are in college we dream of graduation, if we do not have children we dream of a family and if we have children we dream of the day they will be off on their own, or we even dream further into the distance towards retirement. The danger of course is that we may fill our minds with such future dreams and daydreams that we fail to live into the present moment.

I think that is a temptation in the church as well, especially when we arrive at a day like today. We have journeyed faithfully together through these weeks of Lent. And we have arrived at the hill called Golgotha on this day we call Good Friday.

What a paradox, this name, Good Friday. From the earliest days, the church identified and gathered together in somber reflection on this Friday. It is unclear exactly how the title “good” became associated with this day. The Orthodox Church calls today, Great Friday. Churches in the west have called this day, Good Friday, from the earliest days. Yet, I find myself wondering how can we possibly call a day of crucifixion, good.

Today, we are joining a long line of faithful Christians throughout time who have gathered on this somber day, to live into our moment, reflecting upon the events of so long ago. We gather to acknowledge the profound nature of the suffering imposed by a people and a state determined to have their grim way, determined to wield power.

From our distance perhaps we find it hard to imagine the resistance that the life and witness of Jesus produced. How could this God Incarnate, Emmanuel, God with us, cause such opposition? The Messiah of

God whom prophets and Hebrew people of faith had dreamed of throughout time finally arrived in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Yet, Jesus would not be the Messiah that the Hebrew people dreamed of. So too perhaps Jesus will not conform to our design and dreams. Jesus' ministry would reveal a divine power unlike any that the world had imagined. His ministry touched ever expanding circles of people whose lives were characterized by separation, hunger, deformity, illness, and shame. Present to the moment, Jesus reached out his arms of love drawing everyone into his saving embrace. In the moment, he healed those with leprosy, fed those who were hungry, gave sight to the blind and bade the children come to him. Living in the moment, he had the audacity to heal on the Sabbath.

His making the most of every moment suggested to those in authority a disregard for the law. Conflict around him increased, but it was the raising of Lazarus from the dead that was the final straw. The authorities simply would not abide Jesus playing divine havoc with the laws of nature. This was too much change in too short a time and something had to be done. So they determined to do away with Jesus, this blasphemer, who had the audacity to claim to be the Son of God. They preferred to kill this Nazarene rather than come to terms with what his love required of them.

As we heard the lesson from John's gospel, we re-imagined the events of this 24 hour period. We experienced Jesus' arrest, his interrogation by religious leaders, his interrogation by Pilate, and his crucifixion and burial. We heard again the story that brings us to this moment in time. This point of reflection upon the magnitude of his sacrifice once offered. We are tempted to live into the future and as post-resurrection people we yearn to look ahead.

Yet gathering here and remembering the experience of that time so long ago invites us to explore what could make this Friday good after all. The day has been filled with horror and terror. Even his disciples have distanced themselves from Jesus. Peter has denied Jesus. The disciples all stood far off. Only his mother Mary, and her sister, and Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene stood close by. Only a mother's love could not separate these women from Jesus at this awe filled and fearful time. As I imagine the women gathered there after Jesus has died, the image of Michelangelo's sculpture "the Pieta" comes to mind. The Pieta shows Mary with the body of Jesus draped over her outstretched arms. It is a poignant scene depicting the abject loss and abandonment Mary and the women and the disciples must have felt. But opening ourselves to this story of sacrifice opens us to the divine love that is always reaching into the world, bringing about the transformation that God is enacting.

Before the sun went down that day, there was already a hint of transformation, of divine impact beyond our imaginings.

We heard it at the close of the reading. The last paragraph holds the promise of transformation already begun. "After these things," John writes. After Jesus has died the ongoing power and presence of God in the world remains. Previously fearful people, ordinary people who had played it safe in their lives are now

beginning to experience a newfound power that will allow them to stand up for what they believe. First, Joseph of Arimathea came forward. Arimathea is a small village in the Judean hill country. Joseph was a member of the council which we think represents the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council of elders. Joseph, found the courage to approach the evil Pilate and ask for the body of Jesus. A secret fearful disciple, Joseph, became empowered to risk his life and come forward. What courage. What love to want to care for Jesus in death as perhaps he regretted not being able to do in life. This was an amazing act of daring faith.

Then if Joseph of Arimathea's bravery wasn't enough, transformation continued. This time it is Nicodemus who came forward. We remember Nicodemus, a Pharisee and also a member of the Sanhedrin. Nicodemus had questions about Jesus and he could not resist asking them. Earlier in the gospel accounts Nicodemus went to Jesus under cover of darkness. He simply had to talk with this wise teacher. He had to learn for himself the truth of his word.

But we should listen to Nicodemus' story with caution. It shows just how dangerous opening oneself to the transforming power of the love of God can be. It was dangerous enough for Nicodemus to have gone to Jesus under cover of darkness, but now he has seemingly lost all restraint and judgment. Peter knew the danger and denied knowing Jesus three times. But now Nicodemus along with Joseph of Arimathea are among the first to demonstrate the transformative power of faith in Jesus. They are willing to risk everything and they do just that acting in the moment. No longer is Nicodemus cowering under cover of darkness. No, it's awful hard to cover up or creep along with a hundred pounds of spices in your possession. Nicodemus was empowered to step out in the light of day. Nicodemus came forward to assist Joseph with the burial by bringing the essential anointing spices and oils. There can be no question about the power of love to transform a life from cowardly questioner to devoted disciple. But then that is precisely the power of God that is just beginning to be manifested on this day.

And if you think the story is amazing to this point, as the song lyrics say, "you ain't seen nothin' yet." There is more, but first we must live into this moment and wait. And so we do just that. We gather in faith, waiting for the manifestation of God's love yet to be revealed. But then that is a story for another day, and coming to grips with that revelation just may make us able to look back at this day and call it Good Friday after all.