

April 10, 2009

Good Friday, The Three Hours' Service

Meditation #5

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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I can still remember it like it was yesterday. A group of my students from my youth group asking me if I would take them to see Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. I was nervous about taking them, because I knew of the controversies that this movie was stirring up in much of America. I also knew that many of my friends in the Episcopal Church refused to see it, because of the negative perception they had of the film, much of it influenced by the reports they had seen and heard through various media outlets. I sought the permission of the parents of each child who wanted to see the film. Each child's parents gave their consent. So, we packed up ourselves in our cars and went.

The horror we encountered in that movie was gripping and terrifying. It was violent. It was shocking to see in moving pictures, the events of the Passion, events of which we have read and heard all our Christian lives. The crowd in the theater wept throughout the movie. As the movie house lights came up, people just sat there, jaws wide open, crying, stunned at what they just witnessed. It was horrific. The American public, which witnesses so much violence every day on our television sets, movie screens and newspapers, was stunned into tears.

A few weeks later, I was at a dinner party and the topic of the movie, "*The Passion of the Christ*" came up. Almost none had seen the movie and all, except those who had seen it, were opposed to the movie. Those opposed had their reasons. "It is nothing but a manipulative movie. It is too violent. It has too many inaccuracies. What is the point of the movie, anyway? It is anti-Semitic." We even debated the question "Did Jesus die for our sins or because of our sins?" However, we never talked in depth about the actual scripture accounts of the people of God or the Good Friday story. Lost in the moment of good food and wine, candlelight, good company and a comfortable setting, lost in all of the discussion, was the scripture and its staggering power, its dreadful pain. That is a much more difficult, much more painful place to visit than anywhere we traversed through our intellectual exercises.

From the beginning, God has been engaged in the world. God made the earth and the heavens. God brought life sustaining water up through the earth. God formed human beings, and gave us the breath of life, seeking only our love and faithfulness in return. Though we were given these gifts we rebelled. God came to Abraham, and because Abraham was faithful, God promised to bless

Abraham to make the descendants of Abraham's as numerous as the stars, and bless them too, giving them cities and nations. God kept God's promises. We rebelled.

Still God sent the law, to help us stay faithful. God sent prophet after prophet, to get us back on track, to keep us in relationship with God, to keep us mindful of the ways of God. Yet we rebelled against God, time after time breaking our covenant with God, seeking to replace God with ourselves. Things went horribly wrong and many waited for God to act, to send a savior and make things right again.

In the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, God sent the prophet of the Lord, John, to announce the good news, to prepare the way, to make the way straight. God in humankind was coming to give us knowledge of salvation, forgiveness of our sins and to guide us in the way of peace. God was breaking into the world in the most unique and definitive way.

Immediately, Jesus began preaching and healing. The sick were made well, the unclean were made clean. Jesus forgave all sinners who would repent, outcasts were welcomed back into the community, thousands were fed, and hierarchies were being dismantled. Jesus was the King. Not the King we expected.....rather more than we could ever have imagined or hoped for.....because, in Jesus we saw the reflection of God. We saw the way we were created to be. In Jesus we found peace.

It turns out, that was a problem. We wanted hierarchy. We expected our King to put us on top, to have others serve us. We expected our King to crush our enemies, not forgive them. We expected our King to be like us in the fallen creation, not like us as the way we were created to be. We did not want to give up our little fiefdoms. So, we plotted to kill our King.

We arrested him, treated him with contempt, and struck him in the face. Then we handed him over to the powers and principalities and disowned him, in order to escape blame. Then we demanded his death. It was a mob scene, in which we demanded Pilate release a criminal and rid ourselves of the One who healed us and fed us. Pilate gave his assent.

Jesus was flogged, the flesh on his back ripped open, exposing mass of muscle and blood. They put a crown of thorns on him, piercing the skin on his head. They put him in a purple robe, and smacked him in the face, and mocked him. That wasn't enough. We watched him being marched off to his death carrying his cross in exhaustion and agony. We watched as they drove spikes through his flesh, heel separated from foot, blood pouring out of his wrists and the sound of the spike hitting the wood nailing Jesus to the cross. We watched as he was lifted up to die of exhaustion and asphyxiation. Then, in his last moments, thirsting for water and his lungs burning, Jesus would find no relief. The One, who gave us living water and the best wine he had to offer, was given

sour wine on a sponge. Jesus, the reflection of God in the world, the one God sent to reconcile us to God, Jesus, the Son of God, was killed and we watched. Looking at Jesus on that cross, we saw what we did to God in the world. It was a cruel, violent and hideous death.

Today we remember that day. All the while, we have the backdrop of wars, genocide, governments which seek to bring peace through means of war, death and destruction. All the while, our neighbors go hungry. The poor are despised, the weak are neglected. All the while, innocent people are condemned to death in a system we call the justice system, and we watch it all happen. Worse yet, when others do try to bring justice and reconciliation, we might offer little if any assistance; we might offer little if any hope. We fear what might happen to us if we stand up and say, enough.

Perhaps, that is why it is so painful to revisit this story. Because we know what we did to God in the world two thousand years ago and we know we continue the same crimes against our God today. Perhaps, we know that when we do try to reflect God's love in the world, we will endure pain we do not wish to face. We know what happens when we stand up to the powers and principalities, so we keep quiet. We watch.

We know the rest of the story. Christ ultimately defeated death and evil and we are forgiven and restored through Christ. We can stand up to the darkness in the world. The saving work is completed for us and we can stake our lives on it. But, we can't go there today. Instead, we must face the knowledge of what we did to God in the world, what we are doing to God in the world. Look upon the Cross. Behold our King.