Good Friday April 14, 2017

All Saints Church Year A

Isaiah 52:13-53:12 Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9

Psalm 22 John 18:1-19:42

Here we are, together, under the arching nave of the church- our ship in the storm of life, keeping us safe, protected and sheltered, while this hideous and evil act is taking place- whether we were courageous or not, whether we were there or not, Jesus is being nailed to a tree. And like Mary, there’s nothing we can do about it.

There is a Sicilian tradition that the branches of the tree that made the crib of Jesus is the same tree that made the cross. It’s a beautiful tradition that invites us to see the birth and the death as the same. Incarnation and Redemption are not two mysteries but one. We are saved, ***all of us***, whether we scattered or not, because today in Jesus’ death, we will be able to come alive in our own new Easter birth.

As Gabriel announces to Mary, a new thing in the world- the coming of Grace Incarnate, Easter announces to the world another new thing- the coming of Forgiveness Incarnate.

And violence and death, no matter how real, how vicious will never have the last word. The womb of God will transform all our tombs, past, present and future, into light, life, and love.

But today, we can’t rush to that grace, to that forgiveness, to that restoration, nor to that hope. We are here at the death of Jesus, bereft of Grace Incarnate, and left to our own devices. Even as your priest, I have no power. Jesus is gone. I can’t consecrate the bread or wine into the living presence of Christ, nor can I absolve, and really, I can’t even preach. My hands are tied.

We are gathered today as mourners. And we fight this, just as Peter fought it when he strikes the ear of Malchus, choosing to fight darkness with darkness, only to fall deeper into his own darkness.

Jesus stops him, “Put your sword back into its sheath….. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?” Good Friday is not the first time Jesus has died….. he has died a hundred deaths in his ministry- in all of his disappointments, in all of the arguments, in the desertions, in manipulations, in betrayals, and in suffering. Failure and Death are not new to Jesus.

And now darkness reigns everywhere. In the garden, with the religious leaders who are claiming Caesar as king; with Judas who is succumbing to greed, corruption and justification; and with Peter who is panicking in his fear, anxiety, doubt and eventual denial.

Yet, like a King, Jesus is in charge; no violence: “I’ve spoken openly, nothing in secret. My kingdom is not of this world, for this I was born to testify to the truth.”

And then Pilate asks him, “What is truth?”

Cynical, caught in his own political debasement by his own pathetic hand; he’s only a tool for the Romans, with his power rooted solely in darkness and violence……. Yet something deep within Pilate cries out…. “what is truth?”

That’s our question as well. We know that we can identify with all the bad actors in their weakest moments- Caiaphas, Judas, Peter, because we have known fear, we have manipulated power, avoided suffering, been tempted by prestige, and blinded by our own needs…we can claim these failings as truth. That sad truth is not difficult to identify.

But there is another truth, on the flip side of the coin which is more difficult to name and identify. Truth be told, it doesn’t really make sense.

Last week, Marni, my cousin by marriage, was here, with her son Jamie, my namesake, on college visits. She is Jewish and so the Palm Sunday service was her first ever. She loved the pageantry and the rituals and said to me, “I have lots of question, but one stands out. Near the end of the play, when people say, ‘he saved others; he cannot save himself… he trusts in God; let God deliver him’ that makes sense. Why does Jesus have to die? Can’t God just step in? I don’t get it. Why does the Messiah have to go through such a shameful death?”

The perfect question which centers us in the heart of our faith.

Here is the truth on the flip side of the truth of our failings: Jesus, Incarnate Grace, chose to enter into our lives fully, not avoiding the suffering, and even though he could save himself, he didn’t because we are not able to save ourselves from suffering- we cannot avoid our suffering, as much as we may try. Bad things happen. Sometimes by our own hand, sometimes not. Horrific things can happen, either way.

This is the way of the world.

My cousin, Marni’s husband, the father of her two young boys, was killed while he was working as a biologist for Fish and Game in the mountains of Sierra Nevada. On a routine day, trekking deer, his helicopter hit an unmarked wire, cutting off the propeller, plummeting all four men on board to their death. And even worse, it was discovered, after the accident that officials of Edison, the company who maintained those wires, decided to save money and did not follow through on clear mandates that named their responsibilities to identify and mark telephone wires in ravines. Innocent lives were lost for no reason, except for greed. What’s new?

This Holy Week is holy for us because we believe Jesus showed us that there’s a different way to be in the world. In the face of the truth of life: there is sin and there is suffering, yet, on the other side, there is redemption, but not how you expect it.

What kind of Messiah would Jesus be if he slipped away and avoided the very thing that breaks us? Instead Jesus takes us by his hand and says, “I’ve been there. I know suffering. I even know what it feels like to be forsaken. I’m never letting you go. Let me show you how suffering can be transformed into a greater love. It doesn’t make sense right now, but the way through this is living in it, falling, letting go, and trusting I will bring you through to the other side. Breaking can become a making.

I asked Marni if in the midst of her deepest pain, when she woke up in the middle of the night in disbelief, when the anguish was so great, she didn’t think that she could endure, did things happen that felt like blessings, in spite of the horror.

“Without a question.”

“We call that the Christ. When our dying can become the path to our rising.”

“You mean like that day, a few years after the accident, when I forgave those bureaucrats at Edison, and I felt this amazing relief of letting go; I began to cry.”

“Exactly… there are seeds of birth, of grace, of forgiveness, and being forgiven, planted in our tombs. Suffering will not be our end, but rather suffering will take us to a miraculous discovery that life can come out of death, opening our hearts, even though, and most possible because, they have been broken.”

And so today we wait. The birth of Jesus and the death of Jesus are cut from the same tree; the crib and the cross save us. Today we wait.

AMEN