Holy Saturday April 15, 2017

All Saints’ Year C/John 19:38-42

Holy Saturday, Easter Eve. An odd time. An in-between time. The day after the night before, and the day before tomorrow.

An empty day, in a dark and full tomb; here we are in the crypt, under the shadows of flickering light.

It’s an empty day because that’s how we feel after a death. Empty. The death of someone we know leaves a gap, a space, a feeling of being lost, especially when it’s the death of someone we love and cherish, whose life is bound up in ours. Bone of our bone. Flesh of our flesh. Harder still if that death comes suddenly, tragically and unexpectedly, or too early.

Sometimes in the throes of such grief, we do what Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus do. Get busy; they take refuge in their own power, with connections and money. Joseph goes to Pilate, Nicodemus goes to the market. They are worried about the burial of Jesus and how to do it well. They want to do something. They have no idea that they are buried deep in their own blindness.

Sadly, they are still acting under cover, in the safety of the night, even as they know that they are a part of the corruption, in all the ways that the office of High Priest was bought and sold. In all the ways that Pilate ruled oppressively; they as the rich and the learned had benefitted from the powers to be. Nothing new there; that’s the way the world turns.

Yet, they had been searching, hoping to break their ties to corruption and hypocrisy, to change their shallow prayers into shalom- maybe this rabbi from Nazareth could rescue them from their fears and failings, just maybe…… and yet not. He is dead. Very dead. Dreams dashed. Buried deep into the earth.

And yet unbeknownst to them, Jesus is also busy, descending to hell, to their hell, to our hell, to release us from our despair, self-destruction, and indifference.

An anonymous preacher, Greek, in the 4th century wrote a short homily entitled, “He Descended into Hell” that we can still read today (copies made for you):

“At the sight of him Adam, the first man he had created, ….. he took him by the hand and raised him up saying ‘Awake, O sleeper, and rise from the dead, and Christ will give you light.’

“Out of love for you and for your descendants I now by my own authority command all who are held in bondage to come forth, all who are in darkness to be enlightened, all who are sleeping to arise. I order you, O sleeper, to awake. I did not create you to be held a prisoner in hell. Rise from the dead, for I am the life of the dead. Rise up, work of my hands, you who were created in my image. Rise, let us leave this place, for you are in me and I am in you; together we form only one person and we cannot be separated.”

Even when we are lost, in the dark, floundering to bury and to be buried, Jesus is acting.

Where God seems most absent, God is nearest. He takes on our own suffering into his heart. There is no pain unknown to him, no loneliness unfelt, no despair he cannot bear. As bad as it gets, God gets it, even in his own body, pierced in the side, nailed through his nerves, smothered in his own breath.

He is coming to us, even in this tomb, reaching for our hand, no longer sealed off from him. What Jesus offers is a way of death, a path to letting go, a poverty road, a stripping, consoling us to quiet the chatter and without shame to stand naked before the one who hangs naked before us, and that unveiling, that utter surrender, believe it, will take you to life.

“Awake, O sleeper and rise from the dead and Christ will give you light.”

In the despairing darkness, at the midnight of your gloom, in the hell of your own making, you will be able to light a candle and say to the night, ‘I beg differ.”

Why? Because we are the work of God’s hands, made in God’s image, and “together we form only one person and we cannot be separated.” Jesus is coming for us.

Saturday is empty and the tomb is full. Sunday will be full and the tomb will be empty. AMEN