

Church
April 10, 2009

Good Friday
RCL, Year B, Good Friday

A Sermon Preached by The Rev. James C. Ransom

See, I have come to do your will, O God.

It is a privilege of humble joy to preach the saving Gospel of our Lord, Jesus Christ. The radiant glory of God shines through and between the words of Scripture, illuminating our lives with the grace and compassion of God. It is the work of the preacher to show forth that glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

And I believe that it is my job, especially on Good Friday, to point to the glory of God that shines through the Passion and death of Jesus. The Passion Narrative in John's Gospel is perfect for the work that is before me. John shares my conviction that the purpose and the intention of Jesus' suffering and death was and is to show forth God's glory in its complete intensity. To read John's passion is to be blinded by the light of Divine love made perfect in self-giving. And it is to be uplifted by the Holy Spirit of Jesus into a redeemed humanity. We are marked by that redeemed humanity as Christ's own forever. His Spirit has been given to us. John's Gospel celebrates the Passion as the Victory of our God, given to us, as a Very Good Friday indeed.

So, let us look for the glory.

As John tells the story of Jesus' arrest in the garden across the Kidron valley from Jerusalem, even before Judas can point him out to the police, Jesus steps forward. "Whom do you seek?" he asks. "Jesus of Nazareth," they reply. Jesus says immediately, "I am he." Within Jesus there is a confidence that even in what is about to take place, God's glory will be revealed. There is also within Jesus a deep trust in his own righteousness, his own true and complete union with his Father in heaven. "I am Jesus, the very one; I have nothing to hide, nothing of which to be ashamed. You are no threat to me. Do what you will."

This stepping forward reminds me of the boy David, stepping up to fight the mighty Goliath. David was left behind with the baggage when the Israelite army went forward to meet the Philistines, but David crept up among the soldiers to greet his brothers. When he saw their fear in the face of the Philistine champion, Goliath, David immediately stepped forward. He said to King Saul and the soldiers in their dread, "Let no man's heart fail because of Goliath; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine." Saul said to David, "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him for you are but a youth." David replied calmly, "The Lord will deliver me."

The soldiers tried to protect David by putting their best armor and weapons on David, but the size and weight of them were too great for the boy. He cast them aside. He went forth himself, just as he was, a shepherd dressed in shepherd's clothes, armed as a shepherd with sling and smooth rocks from the stream bed. It was in the Holy Spirit of his anointing as God's own that David stepped forward, confident of God's vindication. Inner strength clothed in outer weakness.

But if we turn the Passion story a bit, like a crystal in the sun, to see a different facet, what is revealed to us is the unique and unexpected way that God's glory is made known. What we see is that God's very being is consumed in the desire to love us. It *is* God's glory. We are so wayward and steeped in sin and darkness, beyond reason, beyond justice, but it is God's Passion to love us. It is on God's part, a complete submission to the desire to love us in our sin,

in our darkness, within our evil and shame, even in death itself. God is willing, eager even, in Christ, to offer God's self in complete humility and self-emptying, in order that God's glory may dwell with us and in us, and through us. This self-emptying is an amazing kind of glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth. That love says I am he!

Peter, in the Passion story, is us. So demonstrative of our sin and our shame. Jesus steps forward in humble submission. Peter draws his sword to fight. Violence for violence. When asked a simple question, Peter is afraid to tell the truth, and lies; not once but three times he turns away from Jesus, from life itself, and slips into the darkness. That is so like how we operate in the world. We stay in the shadows and hope to go unnoticed. When confronted, we deny everything. When pressed, we lash out in anger. "I do not know the man." The cock crows. When the cock crows, it is too late.

In the story of Jacob the Liar, if I remember it correctly, Jacob makes his way in the Warsaw ghetto by clever deception and lying. He is so good at it that he is named Jacob the Liar by other Jews in the ghetto who admire him. He pretends that he has a radio, and he makes up encouraging news to cheer everyone up. The troops are getting closer. The ghetto is about to be liberated. It drives the Nazi guards crazy, and they are determined to silence him. They round up some men in the ghetto and announce that Jacob the Liar must reveal himself, or be revealed, or they will shoot them all, one by one. Silence. The soldiers raise their guns. Jacob the Liar stands up. "I am Jacob the Liar," he says. The guards have their man, but when they reach out to take him, another man stands and says, "I am Jacob the Liar," then another, then another and another. "I am Jacob the Liar." Finally all the men are standing. The guards open fire and all are killed. The next day, the ghetto was liberated. All of Jacob's lies were, unknown to him, absolutely true.

In the power of Christ's holy Spirit, given to us, his disciples, come here to stand with Jesus today, "I am he." So am I. Me too. I want to stand with Jesus. I want to be a child of the light. I want to walk with Jesus, to submit myself to the glory that is to be revealed.

There are many preoccupations and distractions that claim us; so many that we actually believe that we are so busy that we don't have the time or energy to step forward as Jesus did, without hesitation, to do God's will. The cock crows far too often in our lives. But today, on this Good Friday, when the soldiers say, "We seek Jesus of Nazareth," you can stand with him. "I am he," Jesus says. I am he. I am he. So am I. Let us walk with him in the way of the cross, the way of peace and life, the way of glory.

The trial of Jesus as John presents it to us is for Jesus a last temptation. The religious authorities want Jesus to say that he was wrong, that he is not God's Son, just an ordinary preacher needing correction. There must have been such a hunger in him to conform. Jesus refuses. "Just ask those who have participated in the signs of God's presence in my ministry," Jesus says. "They will tell you the truth. I really am what I say and do." Now it is Annas and Caiaphas who are on trial. They must choose. For all the world, this Jacob appears to be a liar, and they go with what they see in their darkness. But this Jacob speaks in the faith of what he knows to be true.

Just so Pilate. He asks Jesus, "Are you a king? Just tell me that you were mistaken, and that you will be of no further trouble." What a temptation. But Jesus refuses. "You say that I am a king. For this I was born. For this I came into the world. To stand before you and testify to the truth, and the truth is that God is king over all, not you." Now Pilate is on trial, and he condemns himself. "What is truth?" he says. I am not interested in your truth. For me there can be only one

god, and that is the Emperor. I do his dark and ruthless bidding. That is my choice. Let me mock your truth. Beat you, flog you, crown you with thorns, and we will see who speaks the truth. "Behold the man," Pilate says to the crowd. "Look, he is a liar, and his falsehood is revealed to you all. This king has no clothes. He is harmless. A lion with no mane, no roar. Silent before you."

When we gather to read this Passion, we are the ones who, with Pilate and the others, are on trial. We are such cafeteria believers. "I like Jesus; he is a good man, but I can't believe he was really God's Son. I just like the stories, especially at Christmas. The baby in his mother's arms. I like some things that Jesus said, but what he says about money, for instance, is ridiculous. My money is mine, and I will do just what I want with it. There are many truths, many ways. Thank God I can play around with all of them. I don't want to have to choose. I'm not on trial. Don't ask me to tell you the truth. I am so confused. What is truth?"

Oh! Oh! I just made the decision. Let him be crucified. I have no other god than myself. Jesus stands alone in the truth, and alone he goes forth to die. Trial over.

Every Sunday, by the power of the Spirit of Truth given to us in Jesus, we put ourselves, again and again, in this moment. We stand to profess our faith. Do you believe in God? And we respond, "I believe in God, the Father almighty; I believe in Jesus Christ, who is God's truth and life. I say this by the Holy Spirit that has been given to me, so that I can live no longer for myself alone, but for him who died for me and rose again. I am not my own god. Caesar is not my god, Mammon is not my god, confusion is not my god. The love of God in Christ. That is my Lord and my God. Let me carry his cross. Let me die to self and live with him and eat at his table in his kingdom.

I am always touched by the simple and tenderly naïve story of the African lay mission, Bernard Mizeki. Converted by the Society of St. John the Evangelist in South Africa, he went to Zimbabwe to preach the Gospel to the people there. When members of the tribe he lived with came to him and desired to be baptized, the local shamans objected. "We worship the Spirit who lives in the sacred forest," they said. We cannot allow this if the spirit of the trees objects. Bernard said that he would go and speak to the trees. And so he went and preached the Gospel of the saving death of Jesus on the cross — the tree of life. When he finished preaching, night fell, and Bernard waited through the night for the spirits of the trees to speak to him. They said, "We see the glory of God on that tree, the glorious love of him who testified to the truth of God's uncompromising love. We trees want to be that cross, not an instrument of shameful death, but the means of life itself. We wish to be baptized." So Bernard washed the trees with water, and carved a cross on each one: marked as Christ's own forever. Bend thy bows, O tree of glory, tree of peace.

In the morning, the shamans came and saw what had happened, and how the spirit of the trees had become the tree of glory, the cross of Christ. They grabbed Bernard in their rage and slew him there among the trees and left him. But when his disciples came to take him away, his body had vanished and has never been found, and thus Zimbabwe became a people of faith. Even the trees there worship him, for all are marked with a cross. Christ sustains them now in their present suffering.

John doesn't speak much in his Passion about Jesus' suffering on the cross. It's not that he doesn't appreciate pain and degradation, but he knows that we are not saved by what Jesus suffered or endured, but by the complete pouring out of himself, even into death. This was Jesus' final faithfulness, that God will make even death into life, a new creation, a kingdom

come on earth as in heaven. Faithfulness redeemed in resurrection. So, Jesus says, "It is finished." I have done all that I can do, and it is enough. It is completed. I have been faithful. God's glory is in this moment fully revealed. God dying for us in order that we may live in him. There is no greater glory. No greater love.

At the foot of the cross stood Mary and the beloved disciple, and there we stand today with them. Ready to take Jesus into our arms and into our grieving, sin frozen, hearts. And this will be our personal place in the hour of our death. When life is taken away from us, when it is finished, we can only cling to Christ who has embraced our death in his own, and waits with us in the tomb of faithfulness.

Here might I stay and sing, a glory so divine: Never was love, dear King, never was faith like thine. I am your friend, in whose sweet praise, I all my days will gladly spend. See, I have come to do your will, O God.