

## **Good Friday Reflection – April 2**

I am in the sanctuary of Transcona Memorial United Church in Winnipeg. I am the only person in this space. Because of the pandemic, it has been over a year since people last gathered here for Sunday worship.

The sanctuary feels empty.

Which also makes it an appropriate place in which to talk about Good Friday, because on Good Friday, we feel emptied.

Good Friday is a day of grief. For those first disciples, those friends and companions of Jesus who had journeyed with him from village to village, who had seen people healed, had seen miracles of food shared, had heard stories that started conversations about God and about what God was doing in this world – for those friends and companions, that Friday was the death of Jesus and the death of their dreams, their hope that God might work through Jesus to make a difference in this world.

As someone who has preached to congregations on numerous Good Fridays and on numerous Easter Sundays, I have found one of the challenges to be that Good Friday is so much more physically dramatic than Easter Sunday. The Easter story can seem so understated compared to Good Friday.

A number of years ago, our family visited the Black Hills and attended a performance of the Passion Play. When it came to the moment of Easter, the sound system was at full volume to play ‘Jesus Christ is Risen Today.’ There was a musical, orchestral drama and magnitude to the moment. When we attended a performance of ‘Jesus Christ Superstar’ the moment of resurrection was depicted by a neon glowing cross appearing in the mouth of the tomb.

I think the directors of both those performances felt that the Easter moment had to make an impact, so had to be staged more dramatically than God apparently staged the original Easter morning!

Because there is no blinding light or majestic music that morning. There is quiet and stillness much like I experience in this place today. There is a stone already rolled away and sitting still, there is a person who says Jesus has been raised. In some accounts there is the risen Jesus speaking a few words to his friend Mary. Amazing, but also seemingly so very low key.

There is perhaps less feeling of drama and more a feeling of ‘I want to believe this is happening, but I’m not sure I can risk believing.’ It feels more like a gently awakening expectation than a dramatic finale.

The drama belongs to Good Friday. We are told that Pilate hands Jesus over to be crucified. This Jesus who did so much during his life, now has things done to him. He is

handed over. Jesus has become a thing, that now is controlled by others, to be handed over from one to another.

He has to carry the cross on which he will die. The weight of it presses into his back, his shoulders. Every step is painful.

They arrive at a place called Golgotha, probably just outside the city gates. Here again, we watch as others do to Jesus what they have been ordered to do.

They crucify him. Nail him to that cross, and stand the cross upright, so that Jesus hangs there – it is both torture and execution on one cross.

A few of those who know Jesus are there, crying, shaking in grief, numb.

Jesus gasps a few words. He tells one of his disciples to now care for his mother.

From his dry parched throat come the words, “I am thirsty.”

And finally, “It is finished” and his head drops to his chest, and he dies.

We would rather not enter into this story, but we are pulled into this story – into its drama, its physical pain – into its bleakness, its brutality, its finality.

It’s a story for an empty sanctuary, because we feel emptied by the end of it: emptied of happiness, emptied of hope that something other than violence will win, emptied of the life of Jesus – our friend, our companion, our saviour...God’s beloved child!

The grief we experience in this Good Friday story may remind us of the other griefs we experience in this world – grief at the deaths of loved ones; grief at the illnesses of loved ones; grief at being isolated and separated because of COVID; grief at the violence; grief at the divisions and hatred and injustices; grief at the loss of income, the loss of relationships, of dreams and expectations, grief at the ways humanity has wounded the rest of God’s creation...

It all seems so big that surely God will have to come up with something BIG, something spectacularly impressive to top the drama of this Good Friday story.

And what we get, is a different emptiness, the emptiness of a tomb; and what we get are conversations in the garden on Easter morning, what we get is Jesus adding a postscript to the drama of Good Friday, a postscript that says “to be continued...”

What we get is a resurrected Jesus who will show to his disciple Thomas hands that bear the scars of having been nailed to a cross.

It is easy to forget about God during this Good Friday story. We have been so used to

watching God do acts of healing in and through Jesus, that when things are done to Jesus, it seems like God has left the story, that God has already handed Jesus over to Pilate to hand over to the executioners.

But in the stillness of that Easter morning, we discover that God never left the story, that God is in this Good Friday story, God is in the story somehow experiencing the pain, the agony, that God is somehow in our tears and our grief.

Somehow, in the stillness of Easter morning, in those conversations of Easter morning, in the empty tomb-ness of Easter morning, we discover that God is present even in the emptiness. We discover that even our sense of the absence of God can be another way of experiencing the presence of God.

When life seems overwhelming, when we feel we are being handed over, are being handled by misfortune or illness or things beyond our control, Good Friday tells us that even then God is there, God is present, our grief is part of God's grief...

This space I am in appears to be empty...but no space is ever emptied of God.

Even when we are in a Good Friday space, we are not alone. We may not hear orchestral music or see a neon sign from God, but God is there, God is in that space; even more, that space is in God. Good Friday is held in God – in God's love, in God's love, in God's resurrecting love that says that even emptiness can be emptied of its power to empty us, and in the stillness of a new morning, we again find ourselves in God.

This empty space, all empty spaces, are still God-filled spaces.

And God-filled spaces mean that God can work resurrection even through our seemingly undramatic acts of compassion – acts of praying for others, donating cans of food to ministries helping feed those without the economic resources to adequately feed themselves and their families; or something as undramatic as sending a text to say, "How are you? Thinking of you."

We live in both a Good Friday and an Easter morning world. We live in empty spaces and spaces filled with songs of praise, and all spaces are Godly spaces. We live in a God-filled world.

God is with us, now and always...and the story of Good Friday, the story of Easter morning, the story of Jesus the Christ...is to be continued. AMEN