“Honoring the Hopeless Faithful among Us”

A sermon for Good Friday, 2019

by the Rev. Rachel Wildman

Two Sundays ago was Passion Sunday. On that morning, a number of gracious parishioners accepted my invitation to read a part in the story of Jesus’ last days and crucifixion. The Passion story is sad and perhaps to many of us, even scary, uncomfortably graphic in parts. It would seem that sitting through a somewhat dramatic reading of it once a year should surely be enough. Why, not even two weeks later, do we need 7 more gracious parishioners to tell it to us all over again?

Chris and I had a wonderfully rich conversation about Holy Week that touched on this question, and raised the potential that some of us may think that reading the Passion yet again is intentional emotional manipulation on the part of the church….The more sad and bereft we feel as the week wears on, the more intense the experience of joy on Easter Sunday…some might imagine that the moving and often intimate liturgies of Holy Week are all to produce a specific cascade of emotional responses….

Is this service intended to make our experience of Easter that much more joyful by dragging us to the depths of sorrow, or even worse, to convict us in crucifying Jesus, drowning us in guilt and shame?

I imagine for some expressions of Christianity, this service has been used that way, but after pondering the question for the past week, I am quite convicted that at its heart, it is not meant for that at all. That sort of manipulation is inauthentic to the gentle, freeing grace of Christ that resides in all of the Holy Week services, and especially this one.

And besides, if tonight were about emotional manipulation, then the church only played their JV team to get the job done. Let’s just say John’s Gospel, which we hear *every* Good Friday, isn’t nearly the height of heart-tugging Passion material. For maximal emotional manipulation, to me, we should really hear Matthew’s or Mark’s Gospels, the only Gospels to include Jesus’ emotional cry from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” If that cry of Jesus, just after we’ve all yelled “Crucify him!” doesn’t tug at your heart strings and stir up a good dose of guilt, I don’t know what else would.

So, why do we hear the Passion, yet again, this night? And why do we hear John’s version of it, specifically?

Well*, I* think we tell the story of Jesus’ last days and death once, then twice, even three or four times if we look across all of the Holy Week services, because it is, in some way, our story. It is our collective story as a community of faith in an imperfect world, and it is our story as individuals in some way at some point in each of our lives. We will all betray someone or ourselves…we will all be betrayed by someone….we all participate in structures and fears that produce suffering for others, and we will all suffer ourselves in some way because our families and communities, our own selves, are imperfect. And, at least once, we will all triumph and feel the confusion, wonder and joy of new life. It is grounding for many of us to hear this-- *our own story*-- told with commitment and reverence, by someone else.

In addition, it is affirming, it is healing, and it is empowering to hear components of *our* story in *God’s* story—to be reminded, again and again, that in having experienced the stories of our lives in the story of Jesus’ life, God walks alongside us, right in it with us, as we walk. We tell it repeatedly, in order to honor and name its truth as our *shared experience with God*.

But why, on this night, do we always hear that story as told by the community that was represented in John’s Gospel? On Passion Sunday, we cycle through Matthew, Luke, and Mark…Hearing each account every 3 years. Why, then, on Good Friday every year, do we always hear John’s particular version of Jesus’ last days and death?

Well, for me, at least, the particular truth about human life, and the divine presence in that life that is revealed in John’s Passion account is especially important to commemorate every single year.

For, this is the night when we, even as Easter people, acknowledge the presence of hopelessness in ourselves or in our fellow humans. Because hopelessness is real…it is sometimes a part of human suffering, and that is a truth that we cannot escape.

In the Passion according to John, there is no account given of Jesus’ promise of eternal life to the criminals on his left and right…there is no account of Jesus’ request from God, “forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.” Aside from “I am thirsty,” There is only Jesus’ statement, “it is finished.”

“It is finished.” The door is closed. Jesus’ ministry is over. Jesus is dead. There is a finality to it that is more profound than in the other Gospel accounts—a finality that acknowledges the presence of hopelessness in we, God’s human people, who in the midst of life, often cannot generate the capacity to imagine that new life exists on the other end of that finality.

This is the night when we sit with the hopeless among us, the hopeless in our own selves, and in bearing witness to that hopelessness, affirm the depth of worth even the hopeless, perhaps especially the hopeless, have to God.

This is the night when we sit with those who are so depressed they cannot access God’s love, or any feeling at all besides abject hopelessness.

This is the night when we sit with those who are so in the throes of addicition, hitting bottom again and again, that they cannot imagine any way out.

This is the night when we sit with those who have lost children, whose bodies are overrun with cancer cells but still want so very much to live, and those who cannot make ends meet, can never make ends meet and are bone tired from the fight to.

This is the night when we don’t condemn the hopeless as those who aren’t faithful enough, but instead, sit with them and see God’s own suffering in theirs, and tell them that their experience is real…that they are, strong, courageous, beloved children of God.

We are an Easter people…we are to hold hope even in the midst of this darkness because we know of jesus’ resurrection. Yet this night is the one night we are called to sit alongside all of those who have no hope and bear bold, affirming witness to the fact that the truth of hopelessness exists as well and is just as much in the gentle embrace of God…When we allow it to carve out new depths to the well of our compassion, and thus, our capacity to enable God’s transforming love to work through us.

In John’s Passion account, Jesus gives his beloved disciple and his mother to one another. Even in the transient hopelessness of Jesus’ death, he gave the gift of loving companionship to those who were hopeless. For me, why we hear John’s Gospel every single year is because it affirms both that hopelessness is real, even in the most faithful of journeys, and that we are not to be alone in it.

May all that feels hopeless in your life receive the divine promise of a loving companion to hold it with you, and may you be that loving companion to those around you who feel hopeless, this night, and always.

AMEN.