



Seacliff Uniting Church
Online Worship & Electronic Resources
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Celebration of Worship

Seacliff UC-Good Friday

GATHERING

CALL TO WORSHIP

In the shadow of our suffering
is the suffering of Jesus.

In the shadow of our weakness
is the vulnerability of Christ.

In the shadow of our pain,
is the God who cried out.

We are never rejected,
we are never alone.

HEBREW SCRIPTURES: Isaiah 53:1-6

HYMN: "O sacred head sore wounded

O sacred head sore wounded,
with grief and shame weighed down
O kingly head surrounded
with thorns your only crown;
death's shadows rise before you,
the glow of life decays;
yet hosts of heaven adore you
and tremble as they gaze.

What language shall I borrow
to praise you, heavenly friend,
for this your dying sorrow,
your mercy without end?
Such agony and dying!
Such love to sinners free!
O Christ, all grace supplying,
turn now your face on me.

In this your bitter Passion,
good Shepherd, think of me,
look on me with compassion,
unworthy though I be:
beneath your cross abiding
for ever would I rest,
in your dear love confiding,
and with your presence blessed.

Lord, be my consolation,
my shield when death is near;
remind me of your Passion,
be with me when I fear.
My eyes shall then behold you,
upon your cross shall dwell,
my heart by faith enfold you;
and who dies thus, dies well.

Paul Gerhardt. Public domain.

PRAYER

Most remarkable God,
your love is astounding!
As we gather at the foot of the Cross today,
give us renewed trust and love.
Teach us that the darkest human hour
is the brightest Divine moment,
that where human disgrace sinks to its depths,
divine glory reaches its heights.
Teach us again that there is no limit to your love,
and no exclusion zone to your salvation.
Through Christ Jesus your holy Son.
Amen!

*When we ponder, O God,
the depths of cruelty and depravity
into which human nature can sink,
we are dismayed and perplexed
and can only cry out to you, "Lord heal us."
We confess our sorrow where we have added
to the burden of anyone.
We confess our disappointment when we have
not kept our word and let somebody down.
We confess our desire to please at the expense
of being truthful and honest.
We confess our disloyalty to our friends
just when they needed us most.
We confess our chasing after things that cannot
satisfy at the expense of things of the Spirit.
We confess that we betray you by word and deed,
not daring to take the risk of proving your loyalty
and faithfulness in the thick of life.*

Forgive us, O God, for these sins and for those of which we are only vaguely aware and cannot put into words.

Amen

My sisters and brothers in faith,
take great courage from this holy Cross.
Here is real love, not that we loved God,
but that God loved us and gave the Son
to be the means of cleansing us from all sin.
Through him we are forgiven and renewed.

The peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be always with you.

ENCOUNTERING

BIBLE READING: Matthew 27:32-37 “The Crucifixion of Jesus”

MESSAGE: Six Hours One Friday

In the churches in which I grew up, I have no memory of observing Holy Week in any significant way. I have a faint memory of Palm Sunday with the joyful shouts of ‘Hosanna!’ We Sunday Schoolers were, of course, conscripted to form the procession and wave the Palms. And then there was Easter Day, the joyful day of resurrection, with the great proclamation “He is Risen”.

But of ‘Maundy Thursday’ or even ‘Good Friday’ there was nothing. It seems we were eager to rush past the doom and gloom of that Friday and fast forward to the good bits of the story. We didn’t want to look at death; we were only interested in life. We preferred not to think of sacrifice; we only wanted to claim the victory.

Even in later years when I was in Theological College I went on one Good Friday to a service at a ‘popular church’, a church which had a ‘popular minister’. I can still remember the joyful celebration of that day. No gloom here. No darkness. Why? As the minister explained to us, we live on the resurrection side of Good Friday, so we can skip over all that other stuff. Because of Easter we didn’t have to worry ourselves with the gloominess of Good Friday.

That’s how it seemed to be at Easter in the churches I remember. Things sped up as we moved quickly from the joy of Palm Sunday straight to the celebration of Easter Day. There was no time for pausing or reflecting along the way. As for ‘Holy Week’, what was that?

Yet when I read the Gospels I find that when the story comes to the point of Jesus’ final week it doesn’t speed up, but rather it slows down considerably. The last week of Jesus’ life would seem to occupy a disproportionate amount of space in the Gospels as it covers anywhere from a quarter to a third of the Gospels depending which one you’re reading. This observation led someone to suggest that the Gospels are a chronicle of Jesus’ last week with a long introduction.

I’ve read lots of biographies over the years, but not many devote more than a few pages at best to death of person. Even for people like Gandhi, who died a violent and politically significant death, their death is hardly mentioned. Only two Gospels mention the birth of Jesus, but all four devote huge space to death.

I can understand why people might want to skip over the last horrible events surrounding Jesus’ death. It’s a story, I think, we cannot hear without feeling a sense of revulsion. When we read of the

confinement, the torture and the humiliation suffered by Jesus we cannot help but sense the horror of it. When we read of Jesus being stripped naked, flogged, spat on, struck in the face and crowned with thorns it would be a calloused person who did not feel repulsed at the shame and the indignity that Jesus experienced.

And all that was before suffering the final indignity, the crucifixion. The Roman statesman and philosopher Cicero commented on the practice of crucifixion in these terms: "*The idea of the cross should never come near the minds of Roman citizens. It should never pass through their thoughts, eyes or ears*", so horrific was that means of punishment. For crucifixion was the cruellest of punishments and reserved for the worst of criminals. Roman citizens could be beheaded for that was a swift and easy death. The idea of crucifixion was to instill the greatest pain and suffering.

No wonder then that we should want to rush over those parts to get to Easter. We can probably understand those who want to put all this in the background and focus on the joy of resurrection. The events of Holy Week are horrendous, and we can see why over time the scandal of Jesus' death has been diminished.

Despite the shame and sadness of the event, somehow what took place on Calvary, the hill of execution, was, possibly, the most important fact of Jesus' life. To skip over it or sanitize it misses the significance of Jesus' death.

With that background to the story we may wonder how 'Good Friday' ever got that name. Perhaps the old name for this day, 'Black Friday', seems more appropriate and in keeping with the events that we recall.

But there is, I think, something quite powerful in the reality that the Christian tradition calls this event 'Good'. It dares to call 'good' that which the dominant culture around us would surely call 'bad', and in doing so gives us the hint that we need to look more deeply at this event beyond the surface of the story.

When we take that deeper look we find that for all the horror of this story it does indeed address our human situation in important ways, ways which transform the way we look at life and this world. To take two examples, Good Friday seems to speak deeply into the suffering in this world and into the evil and violence of this world.

The suffering of Jesus on this day we call Good Friday has something to say about our own experience of suffering in particular or about the suffering in this world in general. One of the heart felt questions that we often ask in the face of suffering is, 'Where is God in this?'

Good Friday places God directly in the heart of human suffering, for on the cross we see a God who experiences directly the depth of that suffering. On that Friday we see God not identified with the perpetrators of this evil but the victim of it, and in so doing we see God forever positioning Godself not with the powerful but the victims of abuse of power; not with the abusers but the abused. In Good Friday we see God's empathy with all human suffering and pain.

But as we look on the suffering of God in Christ, we are awakened to the reality that suffering does not have the final word. It only does so if we allow to.

The crucifixion of Christ reveals that our suffering can be redemptive if it is freely entered into and willingly embraced for the sake of the good of love. Neither is it that Christ suffered instead of us, as though he suffered so we don't have to. Christ suffered not so that we might be exempt from suffering but rather that our suffering might be like his. And his suffering was what St. Basil (330-379) called 'a life creating death'.

In other words, Good Friday shows that suffering can be transformed into something that brings life. We see it frequently. We've all known people who have experienced the deepest sorrows of life and have yet somehow managed to emerge from that not bitter people but better people. They descend deeply into the pain they feel, they may even expect that life will never again be worth living, but then they awaken to the reality that because of their pain, not in spite of it, they have been transformed. They've become more compassionate, more able to be open to embrace others in their pain and be a companion through it. Their hearts have been broken, but broken open not broken apart.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German minister/ theologian who was executed in WW2 said: "Only a suffering God will do". And that's what God has done; shared in the deepest parts of our lives, in our suffering and shown us that our suffering can be transformed and transforming.

Good Friday also has something to say to the evil and violence in our world. This is not separated from what I've just said about suffering, for as Parker Palmer has said, "violence is what happens when we don't know what to do with our suffering."

Too often we see around us that acts of evil and violence are met and retuned with further acts of evil and violence. Retaliation in kind, or worse, seems to be the normal response we witness. But this is a road to nowhere because more evil and violence never proves or improves anything.

But Jesus dealt with evil and violence differently, and in doing so showed us a different way of dealing with it. When we are affected by evil, we can churn it over in our own hearts, intensify its destructiveness and send it back with more destructive power than before. Or we can do as Jesus did. We can absorb the violence, the destructiveness, the evil, transform it within ourselves and return it in the form of love, forgiveness, blessing and kindness.

The cross says that violence is not the way; that evil can be overcome not with more evil but with love; that the cycle of destruction is broken every time we refuse to allow evil and violence to dictate our actions. Like Jesus, we take evil and violence into ourselves, transform it within and respond with love and compassion.

On Good Friday there was a power shift. What seemed like weakness, death on a cross, was strength because the Cross shows God as One who was willing to relinquish power for love. And love, because it is willing to be vulnerable, absorbs evil and violence and ends the suffering they cause by transforming them into further love. Whenever we do the same, there occurs a slight shift in the balance of power in this world, away from evil to the good.

If we skip over Holy Week and Good Friday we miss that.

Maximillian Kolbe didn't miss that. He was a Franciscan priest imprisoned in Auschwitz in February 1941. In the harshness of that environment he endeavoured to demonstrate the gentleness of Christ. He shared his food, gave up his bunk and prayed for captors. In July a prisoner escaped and the normal practice was to execute ten men for every one who escaped. The tenth in line was Franciszek Gajowniczek. As he was marched off, Kolbe, knowing Franciszek had a wife and children, moved forward, risking being shot for doing even that. He then offered to exchange places, an offer which was granted. Every year Gajowniczek returned to Auschwitz on August 14th to pay tribute to this man, this man who showed compassion and love instead of succumbing to evil and violence.

When we are all able to embrace the way of the cross and allow the good to overcome evil, there will be a slight power shift and the world will be a different place, a better place, because of Good Friday. That's why it's good. .

BIBLE READING: Matthew 27:45-50 “The Death of Jesus”

RESPONDING

Prayers of the People

We seek your saving grace, God of Christ Jesus,
for all those who on this Good Friday
are lost among their doubts, sins, griefs or fears.
O crucified Christ, have mercy on your sisters and brothers.
O God of the Cross, deliver us from all evil.

For those who suffer gravely
from the cruel abuse of their fellows,
and all who suffer because of the apathy
and neglect of respectable people.
O crucified Christ, have mercy on your sisters and brothers.
O God of the Cross, deliver us from all evil.

For some who are suffering from disease or accident,
and the many who suffer because of terrorism and war.
O crucified Christ, have mercy on your sisters and brothers.
O God of the Cross, deliver us from all evil.

For people who bear their suffering alone and unaided,
and others who though surrounded
by medical personnel and equipment,
still find their pain unbearable.
O crucified Christ, have mercy on your sisters and brothers.
O God of the Cross, deliver us from all evil.

For those who suffer abuse at home or at work,
and the many children who suffer from the bullying
or rejection of their peers.
O crucified Christ, have mercy on your sisters and brothers.
O God of the Cross, deliver us from all evil.

For any who suffer a painful, terminal illness,
and those loved one whose spirits are this day
torn by raw grief.
O crucified Christ, have mercy on your sisters and brothers.
O God of the Cross, deliver us from all evil.

For those who in their suffering have no faith to support them, and any whose once vibrant faith seems to
be ebbing away under stress.
O crucified Christ, have mercy on your sisters and brothers.
O God of the Cross, deliver us from all evil.

For all who in suffering still trust and praise their God,
and those who while suffering themselves
still give comfort to their distressed friends and loved ones.
O crucified Christ, have mercy on your sisters and brothers.
O God of the Cross, deliver us from all evil.

Loving God, we commit into your hands our lives,
that in sickness or in health, in joy or in sorrow,
we may carry (without grumbling)
whatever cross you give us,
and always have time and love for those
who are falling down under the weight of their hardship.
This we ask through Christ Jesus our redeemer.

Amen!

HYMN: “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross”

When I survey the wondrous cross
on which the Prince of glory died,
my richest gain I count but loss,
and pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast
save in the death of Christ my God;
all the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to his blood.

See from his head, his hands, his feet,
sorrow and love flow mingled down;
did e’er such love and sorrow meet,
or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were a present far too small:
love so amazing, so divine
demands my soul, my life, my all.

Isaac Watts. Public domain.

(There is traditionally no benediction at the end of a Good Friday service. The worship begun today goes through Holy Saturday and only concludes with the benediction on Easter Day.)

FOR REFLECTION

Read Matthew 27:32-56

- What impresses you about Jesus here?
- When did the death of Jesus begin to have special meaning for you?
- If Jesus came today, who would crucify him? Why?

TO PONDER

"Our tendency in the midst of suffering is to turn on God. To get angry and bitter and shake our fist at the sky and say, 'God, you don't know what it's like! You don't understand! You have no idea what I'm going through. You don't have a clue how much this hurts.' The cross is God's way of taking away all of our accusations, excuses, and arguments. The cross is God taking on flesh and blood and saying, 'Me too.'"

- Rob Bell, 21st century

"Christmas and Easter can be subjects for poetry, but Good Friday, like Auschwitz, cannot. The reality is so horrible it is not surprising that people should have found it a stumbling block to faith."

- W.H. Auden, 20th century

"Why death?... From the perspective of faith, then, death has a very spiritual purpose.... We go through death so that life can become new over and over again.. Death gives life to life... Death is an exercise in "enough is enough." Death points to newness of life.. what death ends it also begins... never without new challenge, new gift, new opportunity. The death of Jesus left a fledgling faith community bereft until they rose out of his grave to begin life over again, wiser now for what they knew, stronger now for what he was, determined now to finish what had already begun. All things end so that something else may begin."

-Sr. Joan Chittister, "In Search of Belief"

- Can you recall a time in your life when something ended but something new began?