

Good Friday 2020

John 18:1-19:42

April 10, 2020

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

"After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered." (John 18:1) So as the Passion story begins we're in a **garden**, the Garden of Olives, Gethsemane. We were in another garden, the Garden of Eden, at the beginning of Genesis. There was a serpent in that first garden, a creature who planted unsettling questions in Eve's head, like, why **shouldn't** she have a luscious bite of that beautiful forbidden fruit....? We can almost imagine the serpent curled around a tree branch in Gethsemane, silently watching as Jesus and His friends arrive, followed by Judas, chief priests, Pharisees, and a whole contingent of Temple police and soldiers.

Oh, what a tangled web we weave. We can debate whether Judas betrayed the Lord for money, or out of spite for some perceived slight, or in a doomed attempt to force Jesus to be the kind of Messiah he wanted Him to be. For whatever reason, Judas played a hand in Jesus' arrest, conviction and execution, as did the religious leaders and the Roman authorities. We lent a hand as well. His blood was spilled for the forgiveness of **our** sins, after all.

Did you notice that in St. John's telling of the story Judas does **not** betray Jesus with a kiss? Jesus, confronted with a grim posse bearing torches and weapons, boldly steps forward and initiates the conversation:

"Whom are you looking for?" They answered, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus replied, "I am he." ... They stepped back and fell to the ground. (John 18:4-6)

The One who answered, "**I am** he," is also the One who had said earlier in His ministry, "**I am** the light of the world," "**I am** the bread of life," "**I am** the good shepherd," "**I am** the resurrection and the life," "**I am** the vine, you are the branches," "**I am** the way, the truth and the life." "**I am who I am**" is how God revealed the Holy Name to Moses in the burning bush. Jesus didn't need to take out a light saber to defend against the powers of darkness present in that garden. He merely needed to say, "I am he," to unman His pursuers. They obviously got back up again because they **did** haul Jesus off to His trial in the high priest's house, but St. John tells us in no uncertain terms that Jesus is the One who is in control here. There had been no agony in the Garden, there was no kiss, just a question asked and answered, and Jesus Himself will carry the cross to Golgotha. There will be no cry of desolation, no quoting from Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me???" Instead, Jesus will announce, "It is finished," not as in, "This is curtains, folks," but as in, "I've now given my all, and God's will is graciously done."

Seventy-five years ago this week, a German Lutheran pastor named Dietrich Bonhoeffer had just finished leading Sunday worship in the prison where he was being held, when two men approached him and demanded, "Prisoner Bonhoeffer, come with us."

As he left that camp, headed to another, Bonhoeffer told a British prisoner who had been his roommate, "This is the end. For me, the beginning of life."¹ He was hanged the next day, April 9, 1945, a mere couple weeks before that camp, Flossenbergs, was liberated by the Allies.

Later this spring, or maybe summer, we'll be learning more about Dietrich Bonhoeffer in our next Holy Inspiration series with St. Denis and St. Mark. I'll be leading that conversation, but for now let's gratefully remember this Christian who entered the Church Triumphant seventy-five years ago yesterday and who taught us much about "the cost of discipleship" (also the name of a famous book that he wrote). The cost for him was his life. He also paid the price during his lifetime, spending his last two years in prison for his part in assassination attempts on Hitler's life. Bonhoeffer was a leader of what was called the Confessing Church, those within the Lutheran church in Germany who refused to take an oath of allegiance to Hitler. Hitler and the Nazi regime's anti-Semitism, murder of the physically and mentally disabled, mass incarceration of homosexuals, Jehovah's witnesses, communists, and the Roma, whom we might know as "gypsies," were so evil that Bonhoeffer and his co-conspirators decided it was better to risk their souls than to let that evil go unchecked.

Tegel Prison was Bonhoeffer's Calvary. It also became his place of ministry for awhile, the parish where he incarnated Christ for the other prisoners. In the book *Letters and Papers from Prison* we find a poem Bonhoeffer wrote, called "Who Am I?" For all those who draw upon God's grace, call upon Heaven's strength to be strong for others especially during this COVID-19 crisis, perhaps you'll see a glimpse here of your own feelings, fears, and faith.

Who am I? They often tell me
I would step from my cell's confinement
calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
like a squire from his country-house.

Who am I? They often tell me
I would talk to my warders
freely and friendly and clearly,
as though it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me

I would bear the days of misfortune
equably, smilingly, proudly,
like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really all that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I know of myself,
restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat,
yearning for colours, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
thirsting for words of kindness, for neighbourliness,
trembling with anger at despotisms and petty humiliation,
tossing in expectation of great events,
powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?

Who am I? This or the other?
Am I one person today, and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
and before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?
Or is something within me still like a beaten army,
fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.²

Not every Calvary is the place of physical death. We're apt to experience more than one Calvary in our lifetime. COVID-19 has certainly erected many Calvaries in this world. (How strange is it that they're predicting our local pandemic may peak this Easter weekend??) Calvary is the place where we're up against it, spiritually, emotionally, maybe physically, too. But our Lord promised, "When I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself." He wasn't talking about His ascension. He was talking about His crucifixion. He meant that when He was lifted up on the cross, He would draw us all to Himself. Surely we're not alone on our personal Calvary or during this global pandemic Calvary either. There is One who willingly suffered and died, out of love, who was raised up and who shall raise us up, too, in this moment, no matter how painful it is, and into eternity.

Back to that garden in Genesis, that serpent coiled up in the tree, and the couple who lived there. The Exsultet is the Easter proclamation that will be sung at the beginning of tomorrow night's Easter Vigil. It includes this beautiful line about that "original sin" in the garden: "O most happy fault, that merited so great a savior!" It also marvels, "To save a slave [that is, each one of us], You sacrificed the Son." No greater love than this. Amen

¹Philip H. Pfatteicher, *New Book of Festivals and Commemorations: A Proposed Common Calendar of Saints* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), p. 174.

²Ibid, pp. 347-348.

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