

Good Friday  
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Church of the Advent  
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## **Good Friday**

Each year in the Holy Week I find myself in an annual struggle with Good Friday, living out its role as emotional low point in each otherwise hopeful Spring, overcoming all rivals to claim the darkest place in the story of our Christian salvation. This year especially, when every blooming thing around us redeems this past winter of too much water, with rich and extravagant color, it has been especially hard to intentionally spend some time in the dark preamble to the Easter story, though stormy weather helps.

I remember from a long time ago when being off work and school, and having all forms of commerce shut down everywhere on Good Friday sent everyone I knew to church, to hear the story of the crucifixion of Christ and to ponder the worst that humans could do paired with redemption through the immeasurable forgiveness of God. Though there are still pockets of religious observers that revere and observe Holy Week, nowadays Good Friday has morphed in our wider culture as another start to a three-day weekend and just another opportunity for families to gather, with an optional serving of church on the side. And who can blame the impulse to use an extra day off for shopping, baking or traveling to see those we love? Isn't the whole point of God's forgiveness to lift us out of a compulsion to wallow in our sin and shame, and to soften our righteous judgment of others who we think might deserve a good wallow themselves?

Does our loving God not want us to lift up our heads and focus our eyes on the Resurrection? Isn't that the point of redemption?

For my first Holy Week as a priest about 10 years ago, I was sent to serve as a very part time Vicar for a small congregation in conflict that was only a few years old and with few members who had been cradle Episcopalians. I found myself in an awkward negotiation with the remnant church leadership about Holy Week. How many services could we offer and which ones were most important to them? Most of them would have been fine just skipping from Palm Sunday to Easter Morning, but the compromise was to do Maundy Thursday with foot washing, because that was an important tradition to some of them, and the Easter Vigil Service on Saturday night, which no one had ever seen before, but which was important to me. The Easter Sunday morning "do" was set by their collective traditions and consistent with pretty standard fare everywhere: colorful, happy, dressed up people, bringing children and grandchildren to church for an Easter egg hunt, and a big dinner after the service in the parish hall that involved ham and lots of cake. Good Friday did not make the cut; after all, if you are going to have to leave something out, why not the dreary service? That Holy Week went as well as could be expected for a small place with a newish priest--attendance sparse but steady and engaged--but afterwards one woman came to me gravely disappointed. She did not realize herself how much she would miss going to church on Good Friday, a tradition that for her held profound spiritual memory. She actually missed it so much that she described Easter Sunday morning as flat, devoid of meaning; she just could not get into the joyous spirit of Easter because she felt she had taken a short cut and gotten there by the wrong road. She wasn't prepared, and it made her sad--on Easter morning-

-because she did not experience the Good Friday liturgy! Now you might think that was a little crazy, but she was a smart, young professional, an active church member along with her husband and two children, and someone for whom I had deep respect. She did not typically wear her heart or her spirituality on her sleeve, so I paid attention and took her at her word, and since then I have thought a lot about the reason Good Friday has stood the test of time as an important if only once-a-year gift to us from the Church.

Good Friday is commemorated as an anniversary of the death of Jesus--a death on a cross caused by human violence born in anger and resentment, self-preservation and greed, power and influence, and fear--human sins that sadly are not unique to the time of Christ. We listen to the story of the last day of Jesus--who knew what was going to happen, trying to warn those who loved him, to no avail. We follow Jesus from the garden of Gethsemane through an ancient version of jail and court, to a gruesome execution, encouraged and witnessed by crowds of people. There are only reluctant heroes in this story--one pressed into service to carry the cross, one who takes him down and places him in a new tomb before sunset, his mother and a few other women, and the beloved disciple John, who wait at the foot of the cross for him to breathe his last. Everyone else scatters and goes into hiding. The words of Peter's denial linger over the scene of crucifixion where the darkness is palpable, and the sound of the temple curtain tearing into two pieces resonates in a silence for which there are no words.

The most disturbing part of the Good Friday story is that the guilt of it is laid at our feet. There were times in the Christian Church when the burden of this guilt was so great that it was deflected onto the Jewish people, as if Jesus was not a Jew himself. This interpretation is an injustice that has led to unspeakable persecution of the Jews throughout history. And then there have been theologians who have encouraged us to blame the Romans--pagan invaders with the ultimate political power in the time of Jesus who could not absolved by Pilate washing his hands in public. The deeds of Good Friday are so abhorrent that it helps to think of them as someone's fault, which is our go-to impulse when we are faced with violence, tragedy, devastation, unspeakable loss. If it is someone's else's fault, then we can be *angry*, avoiding the dark well of sadness, lamentation and remorse. In the theology of atonement, we are told it is *our* fault--that our sins led God the Father to send Jesus to the cross. The trouble here is that it is just impossible to believe killing God as forgivable and even harder to think of God as wanting something so horrible to happen to his Son. So in that impossibility we give up on Good Friday as an over the top and unnecessary visit with failure, disappointment, and death.

But my parishioner who needed Good Friday knew that this day was about something more than an opportunity for the Church to throw some guilt in our faces. She saw the day as a quiet time to rest in the very nature of God, whose unexplainable love is not subject to transaction, repayment, or atonement. The cross which Jesus carried, on which he stretched out his arms, reveals God's first and deepest impulse manifest in our very creation—to be self-giving. And if we believe as we have been taught that we are made in God's image, then in opening ourselves to the mystery of

the cross, we find the possibility within our truest, deepest selves, to love deeply from the heart and with the whole of our being—without regard to the cost and without waiting for something in return. What this means is that the cross is not meant to stand as an ultimate symbol of guilt and despair, but rather a mysterious revelation of the depth and power of God's love and redemption for us who have done nothing--and who can do nothing--to deserve it. This is what saves us, liberates us, empowers us to love, and carries us to the empty tomb and the true joy of Easter. Amen.



