

Good Friday
April 10, 2020
Stations of the Cross

In the name of Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the World. Amen.

We have reached the end of our Lenten pilgrimage. We began this season with only a passing awareness of the looming darkness that was to become a global pandemic and a national threat to people's health and economic wellbeing. One of the pertinent reminders of Lent is that man is frail, easily reduced to the dust from which we were first taken. "From dust you are, and to dust you will return." This reminder has a purpose, and that is to force us to confront our mortality and what that mortality would mean without the Mediator, Christ Jesus. The Church acknowledges that death is a just consequence of man's injustice. We are to repent of sin, and we are to be different each day as the Old Adam in us is drowned and the new life in Christ is made manifest in us. This Lenten season, the reality of death has been placed before our eyes in a global body count, updated every hour for weeks on end, and we are changed, but it does not seem the change is for the better.

We see unfolding in our time an example of what happens when a bleak world exiles God to the furthest recesses of existence. As much as this is a health crisis, the world is caught up in a crisis of meaning. In the face of a daily death toll, increasing ever so rapidly, the denial of death becomes impossible. People who have exiled God can be comfortable so long as they can deny the crushing weight of a meaningless existence by not confronting their own mortality, their own slipping away into the void. The last few months have not allowed for that, and it is making people panicky.

A microscopic bug has wreaked havoc on much of the world, grinding the normality of life to a halt, as people hunker down in their homes, trying to avoid contact with anyone who might inadvertently threaten to end their lives. I understand why people who deny God's existence would behave in such a way. For them, this life is all there is. They see no eternity beyond this life, find no meaning in suffering, and despise the idea of God for creating a world in which such random natural evil exists. There is a deep resentment harbored for having to exist in such a meaningless cruel world. Their hopelessness and fear are expected in the face of an enemy that can't be seen. The crisis in society is driven by the unavoidable and frightening confrontation with a meaningless life when death is undeniable, but it makes sense given what they believe.

What is more troubling to me is the reaction we see in the body of Christ. We are used to dealing with what can't be seen. Our faith is not in what our physical eyes have seen, and the unseen threat is nothing new. Our prowling enemy can't be seen, but our future hope can't be seen either. And now we must ask ourselves, what have we given up in the face of what we can't see but has driven us to fear, isolation, and uncertainty? Fear of death has driven us from our life together to life in isolation and economic uncertainty.

We are to fear, love, and trust in God above all things. If we are properly fearful of God, then we will not fear that which can harm the body but cannot kill the soul. Christ came into the world to be with us, to become defiled for our sake, and to die in our place. If our Mediator had taken a more distant path, avoided defiling contact with infected humanity, and refused to endure the shame and scorn of the cross, then I can see acting like the nihilists, those who claim to embrace the idea of a meaningless world. That, however, is not at all the path Christ took. In fact, He came into this world, certain that He would come into contact with adultery, murder, leprosy,

political corruption, hypocrisy, bigotry, prostitution, economic exploitation, all kinds of depravity, spiritual arrogance, judgmentalism, sin, death, and even the devil.

What about us? When things were good, Christians would readily proclaim their faith in a blessed afterlife because of the work of Christ. Now, a public sneeze draws wincing and scowls. No one in the church today can honestly say they have acted out of perfect fear of God and out of perfect love for their neighbor. The problem has been seen in individuals in the Church and in the institution of the Church. We can no longer hide behind the idea that the “True Church” acts one way and the visible-but-not-true-church acts in a contrary way. It has become more difficult to discern what the right and good course of action is in these uncertain times.

What is worse, is that within the body of Christ, efforts have been made by some to hold people to a moral standard they themselves have failed to live up to. It is one thing for the Church to have to defend itself against the world, but when the body of Christ turns on itself, accusing its own members of being irresponsible, reckless, and rebellious for continuing to serve God’s people with His necessary gifts, that is a crisis within the faith. When the body of Christ turns on itself, accusing its own members of fearing the state or the virus more than they fear God, that is a crisis within the faith. To some extent, these accusations are probably true, and therein lies the problem. There are rare times in history, where big decisions have to be made and the proper course is not easily discerned. The righteous Law of God is to be seriously considered, but sometimes a situation pits competing values against each other. We have the freedom to act responsibly and to be responsible for our actions. This does not require us to justify our actions by demonizing the decisions of others. Each individual and each institution must make their decision trusting entirely in the grace of God, for in this situation, all are guilty of violating something. We are not Pontius Pilate, and we cannot wash our hands. We trust that God in His mercy will forgive us where we have done wrong, hoping that the decision we have made is the right one as individuals and as a congregation. To stand on any other ground, when morality and outcomes are uncertain, is just another petty form of self-justification and judgmentalism.

As the worst of this pandemic is felt across this nation and around the world, there are two appropriate responses. Both responses are to have the redemptive work of Christ in view, and neither response is to explain why this challenge is before us nor what the exact moral response is. The first response will seem apparent enough: repent. Just as Jesus warned His followers after the collapse of the Tower of Siloam, He warns us that the day of our death is always immanent.¹ So, we should live our lives in repentance. We can repent, confessing our sins because we believe that He who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. In the rite of Confession and Absolution, we confess and ask for forgiveness, but we are also confessing our faith in the boundless mercy of God and the holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death of Jesus Christ. And do you know what God does? He forgives you. Absolution is the blessed word of a heavenly reality that is yours; you have been made a saint, a holy one of God, even as you struggle against this body of death in the flesh. Death is undeniable now. One way or another this body will die. In the face of this reality, repent.

The second response to this situation, or any situation that escapes our puny understanding, is the biblical practice of lamenting. After Judas had betrayed Jesus, fearful and broken as he was, he took his own life. That is what hopelessness looks like. Contrast this with the response of Peter after he had denied the Lord. Peter went out and wept. Peter really does reflect

¹ Luke 13:5

the church in that we all rightly confess Christ at times, deny Christ at times, and turn to weeping when we worthily lament our sins and acknowledge our wretchedness. Our lament is raised when we echo those powerful words of the Psalmist, “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.”² We have probably all remembered the days of just a few weeks ago with a lot more fondness than we had living in them. The Psalms, the prayer book of the Church, has several heartbreaking portions, not all of which trend toward a positive end. Psalm 88 ends, “You have taken my companions and loved ones from me; the darkness is my closest friend.”³ I appreciate the attempt made to memorize Psalm 91 undertaken by the synod, but maybe this is a time for deep sorrow. Certainly, there are many thousands who mourn the deaths of loved ones who are closer to sorrow over unexplained destruction than they are to the optimism of Psalm 91.

To lament is to imitate God who grieved over making man on the earth. To lament over death and suffering is to walk in the way of Christ, who wept at the death of Lazarus and cried out over the fate of Jerusalem.⁴ To lament is to join those witnesses of Christ’s crucifixion as they saw Him suffering for the sake of man. They heard the bitter anguish of His soul when He cried out, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”⁵ The Father must have been grieved beyond comprehension as the Son whom He loved became the sin of all mankind. But in His suffering, Christ was making all things new, establishing His new Kingdom over the world, and drawing all people to himself.⁶

Like Peter, we can weep, not as a manifestation of hopelessness or fear, but as the first step in making our way back to the way of suffering, back to the cost of discipleship, and back to the cross to which Jesus has called us. This is a way of divine sorrow which leads to joy.⁷ Not just joy in the next world, but in this life. This does not mean we are naïve about the suffering of others around us, nor does it mean that we are exempt from it. We follow the path of Christ which leads us into the pain and loss of others. However, this is not meaningless suffering to us; for us, to follow Christ means everything. Our weeping may last for a night, and there is a time for weeping and lamenting, but rejoicing will come in the morning. That rejoicing is found in Easter morning.

Our Lenten pilgrimage is at its end. Though we still have difficult days ahead, we will get through this. Many of us give up something for Lent, but this year we have lost something much greater than a minor indulgence or pleasure. We have lost time. Time living freely, time with our friends and loved ones, and time with each other. Our hearts are hurting, the fear of many is understandable and palpable, the threat of death is undeniable. Jesus tells us to take heart, for He has overcome the world with all its anxiety inducing troubles. In Him, mankind is crucified, dead, and judged. In Him, mankind finds new life, forgiveness, and salvation. He came to be ours; our High Priest, our King, our Savior, our light, our hope. He came so that we would be His. That is what His call means for us; it means nothing is meaningless, not this time we endure, and certainly not His suffering. For He has borne our grief, and by His stripes we are healed of the most dreadful of our failings. So, let us anchor ourselves to His cross, enduring in the hope of His salvation, trusting in His grace. Let us fear and love God, and let the love of Christ dwell in us and overflow in love for each other. Let us not forget whose we are, for we belong to the crucified and

² Psalm 136:1

³ Psalm 88:18

⁴ John 11:35, Luke 19:41

⁵ Psalm 22

⁶ Revelation 21:5, John 12:32

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 85.

risen King. Blessed are you, God our Father, and beautiful are You Christ our Lord, for you have kept us alive, and brought us to this time.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.