

A Sermon Without a Bow – Jenny Seibyl
Good Friday, April 2, 2021 @ 5:30p

The Guest House - Rumi

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

When I looked at the Gospel for today, my first thought was: “Wow, this is a long Gospel” and a close second thought was: “This is a dark and very graphic Gospel.”

I am a cradle Episcopalian, and have attended church services most of my life. The Easter season is no exception: my family attended church on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter. So this goes without saying, I have attended numerous Good Friday services.

I don't share this church-going history as a mark of my devotion to the episcopal church, nor as a way to prove my qualification to preach on a high holy day. I share this to illustrate why I was truly perplexed, and honestly, a little disappointed, to notice that after all of that, I felt as if I were reading this Gospel for the very first time.

And yes, I will admit, inevitably a reading will look and feel very different when you are asked to preach about it, however *why* is this particular part of the bible, arguably the most important story in the liturgical year, not ingrained in my memory like the Christmas story, the story of creation, or Noah's ark?

Our society has a tendency and itch to inspire hope, to preach with a positive tone, to put a bow on top of a heavy topic. Simply, we are uncomfortable in the uncomfortable. We are taught to fight off deep sadness, to immediately problem-solve anger, to soothe feelings of loneliness and betrayal, with the promise of more joyous times, with the promise of Jesus' resurrection.

As a child growing up in the church, this for me, meant some form of “but don’t worry, Jesus comes back to life!” and the more secular anticipation of chocolate, easter egg hunts, and family gatherings.

But, *this* Good Friday I want to invite you to join me as I move into the uncomfortable, the grief, the loneliness, the outrage that is sparked by Jesus’ crucifixion.

I am not talking about inducing a deep depression or inflicting hopelessness upon us. But rather, I invite us all to experience the range of emotions, all of them, even the unpleasant ones, the ones society has taught us to hide, to shun. Perhaps even taught us that these emotions are signs of weakness. Experiencing the entire range of emotions is what makes us human, it’s the fuel for our actions, and it is the ever constant connection we have with our God. Our emotional experience is an innate one, one that we are born with, from the very moment we first cry, an expression of displeasure, hunger, or fear. It is instinctual, a gift bestowed to us by God. And while we cannot control this instinctual response of emotions, it is not inherently dangerous and we should not be afraid of it. It may be uncomfortable, distressing, even physically painful, but it is our **action** in response to these feelings, *or lack* of action, that is dangerous, NOT the emotion.

Imagine that we are Pilate in our Gospel this evening. Pilate is faced with a growing crowd of his people, accusing Jesus of falsely claiming to be King of the Jews, and yet Pilate is ambivalent. Pilate claims he has no evidence against Jesus. How does it feel to be the outnumbered voice? To feel as if the majority of people around us are pushing for something we don’t believe in, we feel

is wrong, or even unjust? How does it feel to have the privilege and the power to make decisions, *important* decisions, decisions that may cost someone's life?

Pilate ultimately is the one to order Jesus' crucifixion, seemingly because the crowds persist. How does it feel to be persuaded, to be coerced, to follow the lead of the majority, and yet deep down know your values tell you something contrary? How does it feel to have made a decision that impacts others' lives? Have you ever felt this way? I know I have.

[Pause]

Now imagine we are in Jesus' shoes. We know who we are, we know our own truth, and yet those around us do not believe us. In fact, they mock us, they hit us, and they spit on us. Jesus was betrayed by his own friend, Peter, when approached by the soldiers. Jesus was continuously questioned for who he was, surrounded by those who were both aghast and disgusted. How do we feel when our identity is questioned, amidst true bravery and courage in proclaiming it? How do we feel when such a true figment of our being is disbelieved, denied, or even a death sentence? Have we ever felt alone in our identities, as if no one understands? To feel as if we are against all odds and all we want is for someone to accept us as we are? How does it feel to have a friend betray us, lack the bravery we ourselves have in announcing our own truth? For this betrayal to deepen our loneliness, all that we have traversed, and worked hard for, has been for nothing? How about feeling as if we are at the complete mercy of someone or something else, lacking autonomy and power? Have you ever felt this way? I know I have.

These questions are meant to provoke us to consider, what is it that makes our stomach churn, our face heat up, our limbs to become numb. True empathy is in the ability to place ourselves in someone else's position, to feel the emotions that they themselves feel. And in participating in this exercise, we all can practice empathy and draw ever nearer to Christ.

These feelings are so very important to not glaze over, to not wrap in a fancy bow. Feelings are information about our values as children of God. These emotions *teach* us what God is calling us to do. And *this* is what we need to listen to. This information is so essential in living out our values, as Christians, and as human beings. Ignoring this **core** of our humanity is a risk to our salvation.

So when Holy week is shrouded by versions of "don't worry, Jesus will rise again" we should be concerned. We risk becoming comfortable, or worse, complacent, with the misunderstanding that if we just tune out the difficult and painful, better days are to come.

But as Ms. Maria Hackett called us to consider during our Palm Sunday service, we have agency in our own freedom, we can steward the coming in glory. And we must.

So this Good Friday: let us all notice the unpleasant, the uncomfortable, and consider what we will do in response. Let us not wait for the resurrection; let us not wait for the frustration, sadness, and injustice to simmer or fade away. We must play a part in the coming of Jesus Christ. We must welcome our experience, as humans on this earth, and listen to how God is calling.