

“WHEN CHAOS REIGNS”
Mark 15:25-37; Isaiah 50:4-9a

He had sat in a prison cell for two years. Once one of the nation's best and brightest, his future had seemed assured. His fame was international, which meant he could have avoided his present situation. Safely ensconced in the USA, teaching at a prestigious American seminary, allied with professors such as the Niebuhr brothers, he was offered, urged, to accept a permanent position in America.

But he had declined. He believed his proper place was in Germany, Nazi Germany. He harbored no illusions. Germany was a dangerous place for someone unwilling to submit to Nazi ideology. Chaos reigned in church life where Hitler had installed his own people as officials of the state church, while at the same time numerous clergy were sent to concentration camps.

Yet, Dietrich Bonhoeffer chose to plant himself amidst the chaos of falsehood, danger, and evil. Facing his fears, Bonhoeffer spurned the offer of American asylum and returned to Germany. And now, after speaking against the Fuhrer, after being a member of an organization that plotted to kill Hitler, the German pastor and theologian sat in a Nazi jail.

If Bonhoeffer had been careful, watched what he said and did, he might have avoided his present situation. But he believed God desired a different future for his country, for the world, and he took the first step to create that opportunity. He made himself vulnerable so that God could use him, so God could break into the present with a new future.

On August 9, 1945, one month before the war's end, on Hitler's orders, the Gestapo executed Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Days before his death, in a message to his friend, Archbishop of Chichester George Bell, he wrote: “The victory is certain.”

Today, the German Third Reich is long dead and Adolf Hitler is a synonym for evil, but we still honor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and read his books in seminary. Facing his fear, and entering into the chaos of evil, Bonhoeffer believed “the victory is certain.”

This morning is Passion/Palm Sunday. To be sure we do not pole vault from the celebration of Palm Sunday to the triumph of Easter, every other year the Church now focuses on Passion Sunday, remembering the pain and horror of Good Friday.

Too easily we forget how Good Friday must have looked to Jesus and his disciples. In only five days Jesus has gone from a triumphal entry into the holy city of Jerusalem to being condemned by civil and religious authorities and abandoned by the apostles. Most often when we consider Jesus' Passion, his torture and crucifixion, we concentrate on the physical aspects. He was publicly humiliated, viciously tortured, and beaten unmercifully. We imagine the torturous walk carrying his own cross to Golgotha, the site of the crucifixion. We try to grasp the pain of having your hands and feet nailed to a cross, your clothes stripped from your back, the agony of a slow, painful death. But though we may accelerate our imaginations into overdrive, we cannot duplicate this type of physical torture because we do not experience it in our lives.

Yet, though we may only imagine Jesus' physical pain, what is far more real and understandable to each of us is his emotional, mental and psychological anguish. On Good Friday, chaos reigns. And that, we understand.

Comedienne Rita Rudner once said, "I think men who have a pierced ear are better prepared for marriage. They've experienced pain and bought jewelry."

Well, what we really know is that nothing prepares us for the chaos of a Good Friday. The loneliness, abandonment, unfairness, and desperation of Good Friday remind us that Jesus understands our lives.

"Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!' In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.' Those who were crucified with him also taunted him."

Chaos. Everything turned upside down. Wrong becomes right. Bad becomes good. Might makes right. And chaos produces fear. We fear that evil will triumph. We fear that truth will go unheard. We fear that we will become partners in the unrighteousness. We fear that God has abandoned us. We fear that we are lost.

On Good Friday, chaos reigned. And that chaos produced fear — fear in the disciples, fear in Jesus. Starting with verse sixty-six in chapter fourteen: "While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came by. When she saw Peter warming himself, she stared at him and said, 'You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth.' But he denied it saying, 'I do not know or understand what you are talking about.'"

Fear, of the loss of one's life, of torture, of being paired with one condemned as heretical. As the disciples fled Jesus' side after his arrest, each feared for his life, for the trouble being associated with Jesus would bring to them.

But even more than their physical fear, was the fear that the loss of Jesus destroyed their future. For three years, they had spent every waking hour with him, listening to him, helping him, investing their time, money, talents, very lives in him and his work. He was the Messiah, God's Son, the answer to every question, the embodiment of God's truth. But now, he hung on a cross like a criminal between two thieves. Condemned by both civil and religious authorities, his legitimacy has been annihilated. Watching Jesus die on the cross was the same as witnessing the death of their hopes, their opportunities, their future.

But not only the disciples experienced the fears created by Good Friday's chaos, but also Jesus. In moments of anguish, no other words of Jesus resonate more powerfully in our hearts than his cry from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Sent by God, infused with the Spirit of God, God's Harbinger, Messenger, Son, now Jesus has to face his fear that the disciples could not, would not, carry on; that his mother would be abandoned; that all he had said and done for the last three years would be for naught; that God, his Father, had abandoned him.

Each one of us here today understands chaos. Everyone of us has experienced those Good Friday moments, days, years. And, most importantly, we personally know the fear that chaos carries.

Good Friday calls us to face our fears. The fear that God is not interested in me. The fear that life will never again be rich, full, and peaceful. The fear that the labels others have attached to us will never be removed. The fear that God has abandoned us.

Good Friday is not just a past event for us. We intimately know its chaos and feel its fear.

In Ron Hall and Denver Moore's book, Same Kind of Different As Me, Ron Hall tells about taking his wife to the hospital to be checked after some suspicious results from her annual check up. He writes:

Deborah got X-rays, but also a CAT scan. When the films were ready, we sat in an examining room, lights dimmed, X-ray illuminator glowing. Another doctor, John Burk, clipped the first film to the illuminator. At first, the amorphous image, milky white on gray, meant nothing to me.

"This is Deborah's liver," Dr. Burk explained, drawing an invisible circle around a shape on the screen.

Then I saw them: shadows. Her liver was completely covered with them.

As we stared at the film, several more doctors filtered into the room, their white coats and serious faces vaguely blue in the dim light. A couple of them experimented with sounding upbeat.

"These spots are a little troubling, but it's nothing to worry about yet," said one.

"It's possible they're birthmarks," said another. "I've seen that before."

But none of them looked us in the eye. The word cancer floated through my mind like a poisonous gas, but I didn't dare utter it.

"We've scheduled a colonoscopy for tomorrow morning," Craig said. They would withhold judgment until then.

At home that night, we settled into bed, and Deborah shared with me the story of Joshua and Caleb, two of twelve men Moses sent to spy out the Promised Land and bring back a report for the children of Israel.

We lay facing each other, heads on white-cased pillows. "When the spies came back, they brought good news and bad news," Deborah said, her voice lilting softly like a storyteller. "The good news was that the land did flow with milk and honey, just as God had promised. The bad news was that the land was inhabited by giants." The Israelites wept with fear, she went on,

all except for Joshua and Caleb, who said, “If the Lord is pleased with us, He will give us the land. Do not be afraid.”

Deborah fell silent for a few minutes, then raised her eyes to mine. “Ron, I’m afraid.”

The chaos and fear of Good Friday is something we all understand.

“Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last.”

Easter is possible because Good Friday occurs. Without Good Friday, there is no Easter. Good Friday took place because Jesus made himself vulnerable. Jesus could have avoided Good Friday. He could have escaped the humiliation, the torture, death. All he had to do was decide not to come to Jerusalem for Passover, or to get on a ship and move to Rome, or to hide in the Judean hills.

Coming to Jerusalem meant offering himself to God. Jesus knew Jerusalem held bad things for him. Yet, God’s grace could not come through his life until he cast off his dignity and stepped into the vulnerability of what awaited in Jerusalem.

Good Friday reminds us that the present must die before the future can break in. For Jesus, Good Friday was a relinquishing of control, a passing of the reigns of his life to God. Chaos and fear can only be conquered through loosening the death grip we attempt to hold on the wheel of our lives and taking that first step of vulnerability that seeks to allow God to determine our course of action. When chaos reigns in our lives, our tendency is to hold on tighter, steer more intentionally, paddle faster and dig deeper. Yet, the gloom, desperation, and defeat of Good Friday becomes possible when Jesus allows God to take control, when Jesus closes his eyes and steps off the ledge, when Jesus decides the future is more desirable than the present.

It is difficult for us to think of Jesus as vulnerable, or giving up his dignity, or taking an unknown step forward, or relinquishing control. That is because we always view Christ in the context of Easter. Passion Sunday reminds us that Jesus faced our traumas, our choices, our feelings. Jesus experienced the chaos of betrayal, humiliation, physical and emotional torture. He knew what it was like to be rejected, abandoned, to wonder where in the world is God.

But his actions on Good Friday also speak strongly to us about how to proceed in the midst of the pain and chaos of our lives. That first step of setting aside our dignity, our ego, makes possible the reconciliation of relationships, the defeat of destructive habits. Giving up control allows God’s grace to break into our hearts and minds. Permitting the present to die, to be left behind, makes it possible for God to fill the future with his grace.

Jesus’ response to Good Friday allowed Easter to occur. The Easter of our lives, the breaking in of a fresh start, a new beginning, becomes possible when we permit the chaos of the present to die and be replaced by the love, forgiveness, and new direction of God’s grace.

In 1982, John Robin Warren and Barry J. Marshall, after laboring in obscurity, announced a new theory that many stomach ulcers were caused by a common bacteria instead of stress. They argued that most ulcers could be easily cured with antibiotics.

Well, this theory flew in the face of decades of medical practice and belief that said ulcers were caused chiefly by stress and had to be managed by diet and non-antibiotic medicines. The scientific community scoffed at the theory and ridiculed the two men who proposed it.

So, one day one of the men, Barry Marshall, drank a solution from a Petri dish containing the bacteria taken from the stomach of an ulcer sufferer. And two weeks later he developed a stomach ulcer, which he then easily cured with antibiotics.

Today, millions of people are curing their ulcers with antibiotics because two men, in the midst of ridicule and chaos, took the first step of making themselves vulnerable to a disease, and thereby proved it could be cured.

For Jesus, and us, that first step of turning our lives over to God, even in the midst of Good Friday chaos, that step of relinquishing control when we allow the present to die, is when the grace of Easter breaks into our lives.

“When Chaos Reigns”

Chaos reigned on Good Friday, much in the same way it often dominates our lives. And yet that chaos of pain and humiliation can also be the threshold to God’s grace. On Good Friday, Jesus took the first step toward Easter, but it was a step fraught with a loss of control and dignity, a step into pain and humiliation. He experienced the same agony and uncertainty, the same feelings of abandonment by others and God that rack our hearts and minds when chaos engulfs us. And yet, the step that made him so vulnerable, so buffeted by others, became the very act that enabled him to move from Good Friday to Easter.

This morning, we remember Good Friday because on the other side of it we will discover Easter. As you and I view and experience the Good Friday of our lives, are we ready, are we willing to let go of the present so that the Easter of God’s love and grace can meet us on the other side?

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