

John 19:19-24

A reflection by the Rev. Susan B. Pinkerton
Rector, St. John's Episcopal Church
West Hartford, CT

Love Endures

Elie Wiesel, holocaust survivor, author and Nobel Laureate, wrote a play that takes place in a German concentration camp in World War II.¹ The Jewish people who are imprisoned in the camp decide they must put God on trial. God is accused of failing to protect the Jewish people as God had promised their ancestors. The judges for the trial are three rabbis. They appoint a lawyer for the people and a lawyer for God. The trial lasts several nights. Long deliberations are made and in the end God is found guilty. As the verdict is read, a great and long silence falls over the people that seems to last an eternity. Finally, one person breaks the silence and speaks up, asking the rabbis, "What do we do now?" One of the rabbis, a Talmudic scholar, looks up at the night sky and says, "It's time for evening prayers." So the members of the tribunal commence to pray.

Having endured unspeakable horrors these Jewish victims of the Nazi concentration camps were certain that God had abandoned them when they needed him the most. Where was the God who parted the Red Sea and guided them through the wilderness as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night to escape from slavery in Egypt? Where was the God who comforted them during their exile in Babylon and brought them back to Zion? God was AWOL, nowhere to be found. How could they account for the hell they had descended into without even a whimper of protest from God? They were desperate to make sense out of the insanity the world had descended into. Even so, after casting all their rage, hatred, indignation and blame on God, they could not sever their relationship with God. They could not divorce God. After losing everything a person could possibly lose, their families, their homes, their health, their livelihoods, their pride, everything that made them feel human; they still possessed the one thing no one could take from them – their relationship with God. Even though they tried they couldn't turn their back on God even when everything pointed to the obvious conclusion that God had turned his back on them. It seems even the horrors of hell cannot sever the bonds of love between God and God's people.

Two thousand years earlier there was a trial. At this trial the rabbi is the accused, not the judge. Jesus, a young Jewish itinerant rabbi, is arrested, tried and condemned to die by crucifixion, a form of death reserved for those who were considered a threat to the Pax Romana, the peace of the Roman Empire. After he is questioned and flogged Jesus carries his cross to his place of execution. He hangs on the cross, brutally beaten and exhausted as the life slowly drains from his body. It appears to the crowd gathered around that he has been abandoned by God, his Father. Yet, he is the King of the Jews. So says the wooden sign that is nailed to the beam above Jesus' bloodied head that is wreathed in thorns. It is meant to mock and demean this strange man whose mere existence threatens the powers of the empire and the Jewish priests and scholars who are in collusion with this occupying force. However, the real joke is on Pilate and

¹Elie Wiesel, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elie_Wiesel, last accessed on March 26, 2018.

all those in positions of power in Jerusalem. The hastily scribbled sign in Hebrew, Greek and Latin, speaks the truth most clearly for the entire world to see. Jesus of Nazareth is King of the Jews, God Incarnate, the Messiah, the Savior who stretches out his arms on the hardwood of the cross and draws the whole world to himself with his never ending love for God.

Jesus' relationship with God cannot be broken even as Jesus' body is broken. It is sustained by a love so powerful and so pervasive it will not be overcome, not even by death itself. It is seamless and without blemish, much like Jesus' robe that the Roman soldiers cast lots for in the dirt at the foot of the cross. Nothing can sever the bonds of love that connect us with the one, true living God.

Even when evil had done its best to upend, dismantle and destroy our lives, somehow God's love prevails. This divine love is revealed in the Jews in the death camps who continued to say their prayers. We see this love in those who have reached out to refugees, the homeless and the hungry in desperate need of food or shelter. God's love is revealed in the brave, young students who raise their voices to advocate for the end of senseless gun violence. God's love holds us when we receive the dreaded news of devastating diagnosis, or when we mourn the end of a broken marriage, or, battling an addiction that appears to be winning, or, when we are overcome with the secret shame that our life really doesn't matter. No matter the battles we are facing in this broken and wounded world, one thing holds true. Our connection to God, that slim, golden and ever resilient thread of grace, cannot be broken. The cross is proof that God's love endures.

Several years ago there was a bishop who was devastated by the sudden death of his wife. He took several months off to grieve this unexpected loss of his life partner. When he returned to work he stood in the pulpit his first Sunday back and said, "I am here to tell you that in the depths of my grief, I hit rock bottom – and it is solid."

Amen.