

Sermon preached at St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, CT
The Reverend Margie Baker
Good Friday, Year A
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The Passion narrative in the Gospel of John is cinematic in scope: scene changes, strong characters, biting dialogue. Pilate and Jesus' interview alternates with Peter outside. There's fighting in the garden, crowds shouting, poignant moments before the cross, and even the return of Nicodemus. At the center of the drama is Jesus, utterly in control. The soldiers who come to arrest him fall over at his voice. At his word they let his followers go. Jesus asks Annas as many questions as he answers. We do not hear of him stumbling on his way to Golgotha, he does not cry out in despair, but says *it is finished* and "gives up his spirit." The Jesus described in John's gospel knows what is going to happen and accepts everything with dignity and calm and purpose. With *love*.

Throughout the gospel of John, the emphasis is on love. Love one another as I have loved you. To love is to lay down one's life for one's friends. Even on the cross, Jesus demonstrates love, unconditional agape love, generous and charitable love. One of the collects for Morning Prayer names this love: "Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace." Jesus stretches his loving arms out, in pain and death, of course, but also in what we understand to be a loving embrace of the entire world, a generosity that turns toward God and God's call to love.

Would that we could all match Jesus' generosity when we find ourselves in crisis. But it's not always how we behave. In times of crisis, we see two opposite tendencies: selfishness and generosity; giving or hoarding; making masks for others or buying all the toilet paper; love or fear. John's Passion includes both ends of that spectrum.

We see how crisis begets fear and self-interest. We see Judas, valuing what- money? power? his own life? over the embodiment of Divine Love made known in Jesus. Judas betrays Jesus and hands him over to the powers that be. Did Judas know for sure what they would do to his rabbi? Did he delude himself, did he reason away the consequences by saying that Jesus had gone too far?

We see Peter deny any connection to that Jesus of Nazareth fellow. Peter, the rock on whom the church will be built, Peter who so zealously drew his sword and cut off the ear of a guard. Peter follows Jesus, but at a distance. Peter wants to know what happens, but only from the safety of anonymity. Three times he lies. Three times he lets his fear pull him away from love and courage- because wouldn't the loving thing be to stay with Jesus? toward lies and isolation.

We also see how crisis can generate love and build community. We see the huddle of followers who do not desert Jesus but instead go with him to the cross. We see Jesus making a new family, giving his Beloved Disciple- who did not run or deny him- to his mother, and vice versa: "Woman, here is your son." "Here is your mother." Jesus creates a new bond, forges connection in the midst

of grief and loss. This tiny group of followers huddled at the foot of the cross become a new community.

We see Joseph of Arimathea, formerly a *secret* follower of Jesus, come right out and ask Pilot for his body, burying it in the light of day in a new tomb. Joseph outs himself as a follower of Jesus just when it seems there is no longer any reason to follow him. Similarly we see Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night with questions and suspicion- *now* we see that same Nicodemus coming in daylight to lay the teacher to rest. He carries in his arms a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes, an absurdly generous amount. I imagine Joseph carrying Jesus, and Nicodemus carrying all those herbs, both of their arms stretched out in loving imitation of the shape of Christ's loving arms outstretched on the wood of the cross. When it seems that there is nothing left, they both look to Jesus and love what's left.

I do not raise up these differences to judge, or at least not to judge harshly. It's all too easy to condemn the fickle crowd who welcomed Jesus as king and then shouted *crucify him*, too easy to condemn Peter's denial and especially Judas's betrayal. But we, each of us, are capable of the same actions. We can be fickle, we can deny the truth when it's too difficult, we can even betray those we have loved. We can put our own interest first and forget that our first call is to love God, and the second our neighbor. But if we can see ourselves in the what is most shameful in the story, then we can see ourselves in the hopeful parts as well. We can be generous and brave even when our heart feels too full of grief to carry on. We like the Beloved disciple, like the three Mary's, can be present and bear witness. We can open ourselves to new love, new community, even when our hearts are raw. We can let crisis embolden us like Joseph and Nicodemus, men who had followed from the shadows and when all hope was lost- all of it hanging there on the cross- laid bare the truth of their allegiance to Jesus at the very moment when it seemed that allegiance no longer mattered.

We cannot imagine what it was like for Judas, or Peter, or the crowd, or Mary his mother, or Mary Magdalene, or the Beloved Disciple, or Joseph, or Nicodemus, because we know how the story ends. We are an Easter people. Even on Good Friday, even as we meditate on the suffering at the cross, we know and glory in the ending. That is why the cross is a sign of triumph and victory for us, not shame and death. We cannot imagine what it was like for them to participate in the death of Jesus. But if we are honest, we can see in their various responses, their self-giving or self-interest, we can see in them our own best and worst, our own power to bless and curse.

My hope for us today is that the cross may be a reminder to be open and generous, to meet crisis the same outstretched arms of love Jesus reaches out to us, from the cross.