

“How Shall We Live? Part VII: Darkness at Noonday”
A Good Friday Service of Meditation
March 25, 2005
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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Invocation

In the distance
the owl cries out.
The snake knows
these are the owl's woods,
these are the woods of death,
these are the woods of hardship,
where you crawl and crawl,
where you live in the husks of trees,
where you lie on the wild twigs,
and they cannot bear your weight,
where life has no purpose
and is neither civil nor intelligent.

(Mary Oliver, from “Rain” in New and Selected Poems)

Welcome

You have come at this noon-hour to a Good Friday Service of Meditation. For me there is no Easter without Good Friday, no new life until the old life has been sacrificed.

This service, held in this sacred and safe place, this sanctuary for the life of the spirit, is intended to provide an opportunity for you to drop down, to sink into sorrow, to descend into grief, to let the weight of the burdens you so faithfully carry now carry you down into the depths.

This service is held in the middle of the day, at the peak of light, in the bright of the sunshine, and in the midst of our active, busy lives. This seems appropriate to me, not only because it follows tradition, but also because it is psychologically appropriate. Sorrow can come at midday as easily as at midnight; darkness can overtake the soul as readily in the day as in the night. Death, fear, anxiety, tragedy and grief know no special time.

This service draws primarily on Christian traditions, but it is intended to be universal and archetypal. The painting on the front wall of our sanctuary, created for this occasion, does universalize the Good Friday/Easter tradition. Yet you have to know that tradition to make this painting work. Or, at any rate, knowing the tradition adds layers to the painting.

Indeed, this painting would most likely not have been produced were it not for the tradition. It was the tradition of Good Friday and Easter that called forth the theme: the

descent into the muck and mire, the blood-red terror and the purple bruising that is part of our lives and the life of nature. No new life without decay, death, and sacrifice.

More direct representations of the Crucifixion also speak a universal language. It is hard to imagine a more universal and striking symbol of suffering and grief than the symbol of the cross and the story of the Crucifixion of the Christ.

I have a thin volume of Crucifixion art I return to nearly every year at this time. It's titled On a Friday Noon and is a selection of masterpieces from around the world and through time – artists who in various ways have poured themselves into this art form. Even Jewish artists have on occasion used this art form to express human anguish – anguish that is sometimes, ironically, related to the abuse and misuse of the symbol.

Introduction to Scripture

Now I turn to the story upon which the visual art is based, a story that had its origin in the crucifixion and death of a single individual, Jeshua ben Joseph, Jesus son of Joseph, the teacher from Nazareth, nearly 2000 years ago; but a story that is no longer of a given individual; it has become a symbol, a container, for human suffering and sorrow in general.

I will read selections of this story from the four biblical Gospels, the intent being to bring to your mind the entire story of Good Friday and the events leading up to it.

First Scripture Reading

1. The Conspiracy Against Jesus (Mark 14:1-2 & Mark 14:10-11)

It was two days before the Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him, for they said, "Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people...."

Then Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him. When they heard it, they were greatly pleased, and promised to give Judas money. So he began to look for an opportunity to betray Jesus.

2. The Treachery of Judas Foretold (Matthew 26:20-25)

When it was evening, Jesus took his place with the twelve; and while they were eating, he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me." And the disciples became greatly distressed and began to say one after the other, "Surely not I, Lord?"

Jesus answered, "One who has dipped his hand into this bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born."

Judas, the one who was to betray him, said, "Surely not I, Rabbi?" Jesus replied, "You have said so."

3. The Institution of the Eucharist (Mark 14:22-25)

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and, after blessing it, he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks, he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, "This is my blood, which is poured out for many."

4. Peter's Denial Foretold (Mark 14:26-31)

When they had sung the hymn, Jesus and the disciples went out to the Mount of Olives. And Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away..."

Peter said, "Even if all fall away, I will not." Jesus said to him, "Peter, I tell you truly, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times."

But Peter protested vehemently, "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you." And all of them said the same.

5. Jesus' Sorrow in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-36)

They came to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." Then Jesus took Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. And he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even unto death. Remain here and watch."

And going a little further he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, this hour might pass from him. He said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible to Thee; take this cup from me. Nevertheless, not what I will, but thy will be done."

6. The Sleeping Disciples (Mark 14:36-42)

Then Jesus came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake even one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

And again Jesus went away and prayed, saying the same words. And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to answer him.

And Jesus came a third time, and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? It is enough; the hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand."

7. The Arrest of Jesus (Matthew 26:47-50)

While Jesus was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; and with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I kiss is the man; arrest him."

At once Judas came up to Jesus and said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kissed him. Jesus said to Judas, "Friend, do what you are here to do."

8. The Denials of Peter (Luke 22:54-62)

Then they seized Jesus and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. And Peter was following at a distance. And when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat down among them. A servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, "This man was also with him." But Peter denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him."

A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not!"

Then about an hour later still another insisted, "Surely this man also was with him; why, by his accent, he is a Galilean." But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about!"

At that moment, even while Peter was still speaking, the cock crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times." And Peter went out and wept bitterly.

Second Scripture Reading:

We continue our reading of the Passion Story with excerpts from the four biblical Gospels:

9. Jesus Before Pilate (Mark 15:1-5)

As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate.

Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "You have said so."

Then the chief priests accused Jesus of many things. So Pilate asked him again, "Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you." But, to Pilate's astonishment, Jesus made no further reply.

10. The death of Judas (Matthew 27:3-4)

When Judas, the betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was overcome with remorse, and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders. He said, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood."

But they said, "What is that to us? That is your concern."

Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, Judas departed; and he went and hanged himself....

11. The Release of Barabbas (Matthew 27:15-24)

Now at Passover the Roman governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. So after the people had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you: Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" For Pilate realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed Jesus over for arrest.

While Pilate was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that innocent man; for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him."

Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. Pilate again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." Pilate said to them, "Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" And they said, "Let him be crucified!" "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!"

So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, and that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood...."

12. Jesus Crowned with Thorns (Matthew 27:27-31)

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole battalion around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They placed a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, king of the Jews!" They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

13. The Crucifixion of Jesus (Matthew 27:32-38,44)

As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled Simon to carry Jesus' cross. And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when

Jesus tasted it, he would not drink it.

When they had crucified Jesus, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; then they sat down and kept watch over him.

Over his head they put the charge against him, which read: "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."

Two bandits were crucified with Jesus, one on his right and one on his left.... and even these bandits taunted him....

14. Jesus and his Mother (John 19:25-27)

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, Mary, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

15. The Death of Jesus (Matthew 27:45-54)

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until mid-afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthanai?*" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "He is calling for Elijah." So one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But others said, "Wait, let us see if Elijah will come to save him." Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.

At that moment the curtain of the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom, and the earth shook and rocks were split and tombs were opened.

Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, felt the earthquake and saw what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly, this was a son of God."

Prayer & Period of Silence

Let us enter into a time of prayer and meditation:

Power of all being, both light and dark; encompassing, embracing, intermingling light and dark: today we would let the dark be dark. We would let sorrow be sorrow, pain be pain, confusion be confusion, fatigue be fatigue, and futility be futility.

No attempt today to inject light into dark, or to bring joy out of sorrow, or to administer balm to pain, or to bring clarity from confusion. No bright optimism, no silver lining, no

effort to keep ourselves from falling.

Today we allow ourselves to walk in the valley. We linger under the shadow of death. We acquaint ourselves with grief. We admit how our spirits thirst. With the poet we cry out:

I'm slipping, I'm slipping away
like sand, like sand

slipping through fingers. All
my cells

are open and all
are thirsty, I ache and swell

in a hundred places, but mostly
in the middle of my heart.

(Ranier Maria Rilke, Rilke's Book of Hours, p. 69)

Contemporary Reading

The contemporary reading for our service today consists of two pieces of poetry from the modern American poet, Mary Oliver. The first is an excerpt from a larger poem titled, "Rain," the same poem from which the poetry in the Order of Service is taken.

The portion of the poem I will read is titled, "Swamp," and relates to a story the poet read of some men trying to escape from a detention center over a barbed wire fence and through a swamp. The part that catches me in this poem is the way the poet visualizes these men swallowing the pain as they climb the fence gripping the barbs of the wire in dreams of another life.

Last night, in the rain, some of the men climbed over the barbed-wire fence of the detention center.

In the darkness they wondered if they could do it, and knew they had to try to do it.

In the darkness they climbed the wire, handful after handful of barbed wire.

Even in the darkness most of them were caught and sent back to the camp inside.

But a few are still climbing the barbed wire, or wading through the blue swamp on the other side.

What does barbed wire feel like when you grip it, as though it were a loaf of bread, or a pair of shoes?

What does barbed wire feel like when you grip it, as though it were a plate and a fork, ora handful of flowers?

What does barbed wire feel like when you grip it, as though it were the handle of a door, working papers, a clean sheet you want to draw over your body?

My second selection, also from Mary Oliver, is a poem titled, "Marengo." It was this poem that I first thought of when I saw this painting on the front wall. "Marengo" is the

name of a swamp or marsh in the state of New York. It is also a stir-fry dish, one created originally by Napoleon's chef. The first four words of this poem are, "Out of the sump," which is my title for this painting.

Out of the sump rise the marigolds.
From the rim of the marsh, muslin with mosquitoes,
rises the egret, in his cloud-cloth.
Through the soft rain, like mist, and mica,
the withered acres of moss begin again.

When I have to die, I would like to die
on a day of rain –
long rain, slow rain, the kind you think will never end.

And I would like to have whatever little ceremony there might be
take place while the rain is shoveled and shoveled out of the sky,

and anyone who comes must travel, slowly and with thought,
as around the edges of the great swamp.

“HOW SHALL WE LIVE? PART VII: DARKNESS AT NOONDAY”

Introduction

We don't have any other religious ritual or religious service quite like a Good Friday service where we are called in the middle of the day and at the beginning of spring to cease our activity and deliberately spend some time with our grief, our sorrow, our pain, our suffering, our anxiety, our weakness, our weariness, our heaviness, our confusion, our destructiveness, our depression, and our despair.

For the most part the trajectory of our lives, both individually and communally, is dead set against such a contemplation or such an experience. We are expected – and we ourselves generally agree – to keep on top of things, to keep moving, to be buoyant, to stay upbeat, to be positive and optimistic, and to fight our depression, deny our darkness, and hold our pain and hurt close to our vests. The strain of this effort shows on our lined faces.

I also think this unwillingness to descend also shows in our governmental policies: our eagerness as a people to go to war, to display our firepower – not, however, against enemies that are our equal, but against those who we know we can smash.

Though I am not going to dwell on public policy at this time, I am connecting this Good Friday service with my sermon series titled, "How Shall We Live?" And I'm suggesting that a necessary part of making our way in the world has to do with our willingness to enter into sorrow and weakness, not only in individual and personal life, but also in communal and community life.

Our unwillingness as a people, a nation, to enter into the dark and to face our shortcomings and sins against others as well as our unwillingness to face our own personal sadness, weakness, inadequacy, finiteness, and the inevitability of our own death is the cause of much destruction and suffering in the world.

Examples of going into grief

The Russian poets know how to give themselves over to grief and despair. Listen to poet Anna Ahkmatova upon the realization that her loved one will not be returning:

I did not close the door.
I did not light the candle.
I could not bring myself to lie down.
You don't know how tired I was.

And to think that everything's ruined,
That we suffer like the damned in hell.
Oh, I was certain that you would come back.

The Chinese poets also know how to fall into grief. Here's poet Mei Yao Ch'en writing in the spring of the year about the death of a new-born child. Whether this is her own child or someone else's, I cannot be certain.

The flowers in bud on the trees
Are pure like this dead child.
The East wind will not let them last.
It will blow them into blossom,
And at last into the earth.
It is the same with this beautiful life [child]
Which was so dear to me.
While his mother is weeping tears of blood,
Her breasts are still filling with milk.
(“On the Death of a New-Born Child”)

The Hebrew poets also knew what it was to let themselves cry out in pain. You will recognize this anguished cry from a later Jewish teacher:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,
So far from helping me and from the words of my groaning?
I call all day, my God, but you never answer,
All night long I call and cannot rest.

(Psalm 22:1,2)

Good Friday: not a prelude to Easter

This darkness into which we fall is one pole of our life. To my mind, the darkness of Good Friday is not a prelude to the light of Easter and it ought not to be regarded as something one tries to move through as quickly as possible on one's way to the bright triumph of Easter.

I suggest, actually, that if you treat Good Friday as a prelude to Easter, you never truly get to Easter. For if you can't embrace your sorrow, you will also miss your joy; if you can't embrace your death, you will also miss your life. The darkness of life is one-half of our existence; it has its own reality and its own validity.

The authentic life, therefore, and the truly religious life, has to do with being awake and attentive to the *whole* of being.

Eternal life consists, not first of all in striving for an existence beyond this life and beyond this time, but rather the Eternal is experienced as the depth dimension of this moment and time – whatever the reality of that moment, be it dark or light, or the intermingling of the two.

If we learn anything from psychology or from spiritual disciplines, it is to breathe into the pain, the anxiety, the fear, and to let ourselves fall into our grief ... in the faith that Being is greater than non-being and can contain our grief.

A story of presence

About four years ago, just at this time of the year, I was conducting a Grief Seminar for persons who had recently suffered the loss of loved ones. I heard this story from a woman in the group:

Her mother was dying far from the city in which she lived. It was necessary, then, for her to get on the plane and make this most difficult pilgrimage to be present with her dying mother. But as she sat in the airport waiting for the plane to depart she said to herself, "I don't want to go. I don't want to do this. I don't know if I can do this."

In this Gethsemane-like state of anxiety she looked around the airport at the faces of others who were sitting there, and a thought, like a breeze in springtime, came to her. The thought was this:

"There are all these people here in this airport. All of them have been born of mothers. Many of them have already lost their mothers. Eventually all of them will lose their mothers. The mothers of each of these people will die. It will happen for every single one of them. And now it is happening for me. I must go and I must be with my mother."

And so she did. She got on the plane and she went to her mother. Then for several days she and her father and her sister and her daughter and other family members stayed at the side of her mother, in her home, and with the aid of the Hospice angels. She played the

piano for her mother. The family sang familiar hymns. And, then, as her mother's breathing grew labored, they gathered around her bed.

All grew quiet in the house and, after a time, there was one final breath, one great final exhalation.

"She breathed her last," this woman said. "She breathed her last!"

And I don't know if she was drawing on the Crucifixion story when she said this - where the Christ is said to have given a great sigh and breathed his last - but whatever the case, her mother, too, gave a great sigh and breathed her last. She breathed her last and she crossed over the River Jordan. And it was finished!

And it was a crossing over not only for her mother, but in a way it was a crossing over for this woman as well.

And it was both Good Friday and Easter for her, because through tears of sadness and sorrow and saying goodbye, she had faced and accomplished this difficult task. She had faced her fear, breathed into her pain, had received unexpected aid, and had survived - richer, deeper, more aware of the mystery of life and death.

And Jesus, on the evening before his death ... came to a place called Gethsemane. And he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." Then Jesus took Peter and James and John with him. And a sudden fear came over him, and great distress. And he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even unto death. Remain here and watch."

And going a little further he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, this hour might pass from him. "Abba, Father," he said, "all things are possible to Thee; take this cup from me. Nevertheless, not what I will, but thy will be done."

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon preached by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship for a Good Friday Service of Meditation, Friday, March 25, 2005. The spoken sermon, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)