

**“Necessary Tensions: Death and Despair:  
‘I have been one acquainted with the night’”  
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship  
Good Friday Service of Meditation, April 2, 20109  
Rev. Bruce Bode**

**Opening Words**

From the 27<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Matthew:

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 sabachthani?*" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

(Matthew 27:45-46)

From the poetry of Robert Frost:

I have been one acquainted with the night.  
I have walked out in rain – and back in rain.  
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

(from, "Acquainted with the Night," Robert Frost)

**Welcome**

You have come at this noon-hour to a Good Friday Service of Meditation, a service intended to provide you with an opportunity to drop down, to let the weight of the burdens that you so faithfully carry, carry you now into the depths.

Our service this year is being held for the first time in our newly-built sanctuary, a holy place, a bounded place, a safe place, a place intended as a container for one's soul or innermost self.

Our service is held in the middle of the day, at the peak of light, and in the midst of our active, busy lives. This is appropriate, not only because it follows tradition, but also because sorrow and suffering can come at midday as well as at midnight ... and anxiety, fear, tragedy, and death know no special time.

Our service this year, in addition to the music of Johann Sebastian Bach and Beatus Meier, will consist of readings both ancient and modern. The ancient readings will be from the Christian gospels, but intended to be universal and archetypal ... so that this story from nearly 2000 years ago of the suffering and death, the passion and crucifixion, of Jeshua ben Joseph, Jesus son of Joseph, is not, first of all, a story of an historical individual but rather a story that has become symbol and myth, that is, a container or vessel for human suffering and sorrow in general.

And the modern readings in our service today will be from poet Robert Frost, who, as we shall see, was well-acquainted with suffering, sorrow, loneliness, despair, and grief.

I will now read selected portions of the passion narrative taken from the four biblical Gospels, the intent being to bring to your mind the entire story of Good Friday – “God’s Friday” is the origin of that term.

### **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, 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 yet 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.

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### **Introduction to Second Scripture Reading**

We continue our reading of the Passion Story with the following 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 back 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 him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he 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 man was a son of God."

**Hymn #265 – "O Sacred Head, Now Wounded"**

### **Prayer & Period of Silence**

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, Rilke, 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.

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

**“Necessary Tensions: Death and Despair:  
‘I have been one acquainted with the night’”**

**Introduction**

My Good Friday reflection today is the fifth part of a sermon series that has to do with what I have been calling “necessary tensions” or “polar tensions” in life, that is, tensions that are inherent in reality itself – tensions that if avoided, evaded, unrecognized or split apart cause psychological, spiritual, and emotional pain and suffering beyond what is required by nature.

In each of my previous four sermons on these “polar tensions,” I have dealt with both poles of the tension in a single service and sermon. That will not be the case today. Today, I will be dealing with only one pole of the polar tension, saving the other pole for two days from now on Easter Sunday.

The polar tension I am dealing with on this Good Friday/Easter weekend is the greatest of all the polar tensions of our lives: the tension between life and death, creation and destruction. There is no life without death, no creation without destruction.

Good Friday and Easter are of one piece. They belong together, and when split apart, neither makes any sense. The joy and renewal of Easter is inevitably tied to the sorrow and despair of Good Friday.

The poet whose poems I have been using to illustrate the “necessary tensions” of our lives in this sermon series is Robert Frost. And though, popularly, Robert Frost is regarded as a benign and witty New England rural poet, a man of the people, to those with deeper acquaintance with his poetry, he can be very dark and despairing, even ultimately cynical.

I don't believe that Robert Frost is ultimately cynical in his approach to life – I will indicate why I believe that on Easter Sunday – but I do agree that he can be very dark. He has said of his own poetry, “It's full of darkness.” (Robert Frost: A Biography, Jeffrey Meyers, p. 319)

Today at this Good Friday service I am going to visit some of his darkness, inviting you to journey with me there, a journey into loneliness, emptiness, despair, and death. I make this journey in the conviction that the avoidance or the splitting off of despair, sorrow, and death from the whole of life blocks us, and causes us to be us rigid, cold, potentially violent, and even crazy ... as well as keeping us from experiencing the other pole of this polarity, that of the joy, wonder, and beauty of life. As Kahlil Gibran put it in our responsive reading last Sunday:

“Your joy is your sorrow unmasked, and the same well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your tears.”

I also make this journey into darkness in the conviction that it's in the surrender to the darkness and the sorrow of life that we will find a source of healing and solace – that grief is the cure for our wounds, that it's in the embrace of crucifixion that resurrection occurs.

### **The texts for our journey**

I invite you, now, to turn to your bulletin in which you will find printed the poems that will be the texts for our journey into darkness, beginning with the poem titled, “In Hardwood Groves.”

Like many poets, Frost uses outer aspects of our natural world to mirror and illustrate the interior spiritual and emotional world. And many of his poems deal with the woods, with trees, and with the leaves of trees.

In this opening poem, Frost speaks about the nature of *our* world – not some imaginary world apart from this world, but this very real, concrete world, a world in which life and death are connected and commingled, a world in which the old life *must* give way to the new life, a world in which the new life comes from the death and decay of the old life, both physically and psychologically. The old life *must* be pieced so that the new can come through – again, the embrace of crucifixion out of which resurrection comes.

### **In Hardwood Groves**

The same leaves over and over again!  
They fall from giving shade above  
To make one texture of faded brown  
And fit the earth like a leather glove.

Before the leaves can mount again  
To fill the trees with another shade,  
They must go down past things coming up.  
They must go down into the dark decayed.

They *must* be pierced by flowers and put  
Beneath the feet of dancing flowers.  
However it is in some other world  
I know that this is the way in ours.

### **Will power**

I once heard Frost say on a tape that he could mock anything out of his system ... which I take to mean that he believed that by sheer force of will he could push his feelings aside and keep moving forward. And, indeed, he was a survivor.

But as we shall see in some of the later poems today, I don't believe he was actually able to "mock anything out of his system." Our second poem, however, titled, "A Leaf Treader" – again, a poem in which the message is carried by the leaves – we have example of using your will power and ego strength to bore through issues, to stay on top of things, and not let personal difficulties or the sorrow of the world take you down.

Interestingly, in this poem, the poet wonders whether he might not be putting forth too much strength and energy trying to stay "up." He wonders whether he may be too fierce in fighting his fear. Nonetheless, he rationally decides to try to conquer his fear and keep plowing forward.

And let's hear Robert Frost, himself, read this poem. This will be from the same tape I have used twice before in this sermon series, a poetry reading that Frost gave at the Fountain Street Church on November 19, 1959 when he was 85 years old. As you will hear from this tape, Frost was not reading his poems from a written text, he was reciting them from memory, as well as deciding as the reading went along which poems he would use next. [play CD]

### **A Leaf Treader**

I have been treading on leaves all day until I am autumn-tired.  
God knows all the color and form of leaves I have trodden on and mired.  
Perhaps I have put forth too much strength and been too fierce from fear.  
I have safely trodden underfoot the leaves of another year.

All summer long they were overhead, more lifted up than I.  
To come to their final place in earth they had to pass me by.  
All summer long I thought I heard them threatening under their breath.  
And when they came it seemed with a will to carry me with them to death.

They spoke to the fugitive in my heart as if it were leaf to leaf.  
They tapped at my eyelids and touched my lips with an invitation to grief.  
But it was no reason I had to go because they had to go.  
Now up my knee to keep on top of another year of snow.

So in this poem, even though the poet felt an invitation to enter the sorrow of the world and was tempted to go down into grief and perhaps even death – the leaves spoke to the "fugitive" in his heart – he resisted the impulse and refused the invitation.

### **Willing to enter sorrow**

The next few poems are ones, however, in which the poet is either willing to enter sorrow, loneliness, and despair; or, simply, unable to keep it from him (though willing to record what it feels like).

In this next poem, titled “Bereft,” the poet feels like a lonely fugitive in the world, something he can’t hide as he stands alone in the door of his house, the wind roaring, the wind like a conscious power confronting him. And, again, it is fallen and wind-blown leaves that, like a hissing snake, carry the message.

### **Bereft**

Where had I heard this wind before  
Change like this to a deeper roar?  
What would it take my standing there for,  
Holding open a restive door,  
Looking down hill to a frothy shore?  
Summer was past and day was past.  
Somber clouds in the west were massed.  
Out in the porch’s sagging floor,  
Leaves got up in a coil and hissed,  
Blindly struck at my knee and missed.  
Something sinister in the tone  
Told me my secret must be known:  
Word I was in the house alone  
Somehow must have gotten abroad,  
Word I was in my life alone,  
Word I had no one left but God.

And so the poet, feeling alone with no one but God to understand him, turns in this next poem to God to speak about his loneliness and despair.

### **Not All There**

I turned to speak to God  
About the world’s despair;  
But to make bad matters worse  
I found God wasn’t there.

God turned to speak to me  
(Don’t anybody laugh)  
God found I wasn’t there –  
At least not over half.

This ironic poem and somewhat humorous poem raises the question about who it is that is absent. Is it God, or is it the poet who is absent, having turned in the wrong direction

to address God, and who perhaps doesn't understand who or what God is ... for when God turns to address the poet, God finds the poet not half there?

This short poem reminds me of an even shorter Frost poem, a couplet, offered as a prayer:

Forgive, O Lord, my little jokes on Thee,  
And I'll forgive Thy great big one on me.

Said Frost, "I'm never more serious than when I'm foolin."

So now let's move from this poem in which the poet questions if he's all there, to a clearly serious and frightening exploration of emptiness and loneliness. It's titled "Desert Places," and the setting is winter.

### **Desert Places**

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast  
In a field I looked into going past,  
And the ground almost covered smooth in snow,  
But a few weeds and stubble showing last.

The woods around it have it – it is theirs.  
All animals are smothered in their lairs.  
I am too absent-spirited to count;  
The loneliness includes me unawares.

And lonely as it is, that loneliness  
Will be more lonely ere it will be less –  
A blanker whiteness of benighted snow  
With no expression, nothing to express.

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces  
Between stars – on stars where no human race is.  
I have it in me so much nearer home  
To scare myself with my own desert places.

This poem with its "snow-covered landscape, so muffled and blank, mirrors an inner feeling of isolation and spiritual poverty," (Robert Frost: A Life, Jay Parini, p. 285) and it may be one in which the poet realizes he is on the verge of going into a deep depression and there is nothing he can do to stop it. There are empty places in him that feel much larger and more ominous than the empty spaces between stars.

Writes one his biographers, Jay Parini:

“One is amazed by the endless succession of illnesses recorded by Elinor [Frost’s wife], month after month. These bouts of flu may have been related to the depression that Frost was always, on some level, fending off. Elinor often notes in her letters that “Robert has taken to his bed,” with or without obvious cause. He went through prolonged periods when he could not teach, or travel, or write.” (Parini, p. 285]

The next poem is titled “Despair,” a poem in which the poet imagines himself drowned at the bottom of the sea. This poem was written at a time when Frost was struggling to stay afloat – written shortly after the death of his mother, Belle Frost, a death which followed shortly after the death of their first-born child, Elliott, who is associated with the poem “Home Burial” that we looked at last Sunday. Frost’s mother, too, was deeply affected by Elliott’s death.

Frost never published this poem in any volume, perhaps because of its personal nature, or perhaps because he felt it was too self-pitying. The ending of the poem suggests that not only has the author drowned, but in his struggle has taken some better and purer life to the bottom with him, life represented by the white lily.

### **Despair**

I am like a dead diver after all’s  
Done, still held fast in the weeds’ snare below,  
Where in the gloom his limbs begin to glow  
Swaying at his moorings as the roiled bottom falls.  
There was a moment when with vainest calls  
He drank the water, saying, “Oh let me go –  
*God* let me go,” – for then he could not know  
As in the sun’s warm light on earth and walls.

I am like a dead diver in this place.  
I was alive here too one desperate space,  
And near prayer in the one whom I invoked.  
I tore the muscles from limbs and choked.  
My sudden struggle may have dragged down some  
White lily from the air – and now the fishes come.

And my concluding poem for this Good Friday service is one that can provide a kind of summary statement to these poems I’ve read. It’s titled, “Acquainted with the Night,” written in the mid-1920’s when Frost was about fifty years old and a poet-in-residence – the first of its kind – at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

This poem is a little unusual for Frost in that it’s placed in an urban setting. And it’s also unusual in that it’s a directly confessional poem. Usually, Frost hides his personal feelings in a narrative or the images of a poem, but here his guard is down.

The “luminary clock” referred to in this poem, Frost once said, is the clock in the tower of the Washtenaw County Courthouse in Ann Arbor, Michigan – still there, last I heard.

And just this morning it came to me out of sleep, that, of course – don’t know how I missed it before – the title of this poem and the first and last lines, as well as part of its theme, are related to the writings of the Hebrew prophet Isaiah and to his image of the Suffering Servant, which was later applied by the gospel writers and the early Christian community to Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ. The pertinent passage from Isaiah chapter 53, taken from the King James Bible, with which Frost would no doubt be familiar, words that I memorized in my youth, words often read at Good Friday services, are as follows:

“Who hath believed our message? and to whom hath the arm of Jehovah been revealed? For he grew up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him.

“He was despised, and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their face he was despised; and we esteemed him not.

“Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows; yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and Jehovah hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

“He was oppressed, yet when he was afflicted he opened not his mouth; as a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and as a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth.” (Isaiah 53:3-7)

I’m not suggesting that Robert Frost thought he was playing out a messianic role in his life or in the writing of this poem. And yet we can find in this poem and other poems in which he acquaints us with his grief modern versions of the archetypal story of suffering and crucifixion that we recall today.

### **Acquainted with the Night**

I have been one acquainted with the night.  
I have walked out in rain – and back in rain.  
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.  
I have passed by the watchman on his beat  
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet  
When far away an interrupted cry  
Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-bye;  
And further still at an unearthly height,  
One luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.  
I have been one acquainted with the night.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon given by the Reverend Bruce A. Bode on Good Friday, April 2, 2010, at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, the fifth in a sermon series on “Necessary Tensions in Life.” The spoken sermon, available on CD disc at the Fellowship, may differ somewhat in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)