

April 7, 2023  
Good Friday  
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Isaiah 52:13-53:12  
Psalm 22  
Ephesians 1:3-10  
John 18:1-19:42

Jesus is crucified and buried. We are cloaked in the stillness of death.

During Good Friday sermon preparation, I always imagine this moment. This year when I did so, what came into my mind was an image: the universe collapsed in on itself, emptied not out but in, a sort of reverse Big Bang, and the vast expanse of all creation concentrated into a single burning ember hovering inside an otherwise lightless tomb.

What more is there, really, to say?

Good Friday always threatens to rob me of my words, but I might be alone in that; so very much has been said about the crucifixion. I suppose it makes sense. Every horrific event evokes the question, *Why?* This could be no different. For many Christians, the *Why* of the crucifixion is this: *Because Jesus had to die for our sins.*

If you've been at St. Thomas's a while, you already know that is not my favorite Christian assertion, even though it is a very popular one. It's related to a theology called *substitutionary atonement*, and the subset of substitutionary atonement called *penal substitution*. These mean, in short, that our infractions against God are so egregious that we can't possibly make up for them ourselves, and that's where Jesus comes in. Substitutionary atonement asserts that Christ *suffers* for us; penal substitution extends that to say that Christ is *punished* instead of us. Reject the solution that Christ offers, and death brings you straight to hell, do not pass Go, do not collect \$200.

I understand the lure: if a person is fearful about what will happen after death, this theology provides reassurance. Still, I remain unconvinced, because I would have to believe things that I just can't; for example, that God created a species that is inherently fatally flawed; that God would consign anyone to an eternity of suffering; that salvation is accomplished only individually and in the next life. Moreover, this theology has caused real harm. Only a very short leap leads to the myth of redemptive violence and the myth of redemptive suffering. From there it takes very little to connect the dots to colonialism and racism and misogyny and homophobia and transphobia and even gun violence.

Oh, and anti-Semitism. I live in the Spring Glen neighborhood of Hamden. The residents of Spring Glen have a neighborhood Facebook page. On that page last Friday was a post from a neighbor who had found an anti-Semitic flyer outside their home. Others noted receiving it. I wondered whether Spring Glen was targeted because it is home to two synagogues. But I later learned that the flyers were spread in Hamden and New Haven along with Whitney Avenue corridor. It specifically targeted a Yale student who has been advocating for the removal Eli Whitney's name from that thoroughfare. I found a photo of the flyer online. It's completely ridiculous, really. But it's not funny.

Anti-Semitism has been on the rise. When it comes to anti-Semitism, Christianity has a long history of culpability. While some of us Christians seek to atone for past sins, others just keep piling them on. The passion gospels are still used to blame Jesus' death on every Jew since his death. Note that, for our service tonight, I read a slightly adapted version of the Passion of John in order to dull this effect. Coming up shortly are the Solemn Collects, which used to include a prayer for the conversion of Jews. Over time it was revised to pray for conversion without specifying who might be converted; that's what's still in the current *Book of Common Prayer*. In its stead tonight we will pray for the welfare of the Jewish people. There are notes about the adjustments at the end of your service bulletin.

These are small things, but I think they're important. That's because the Episcopal Church joins Roman and Orthodox Christianity in affirming the idea of *lex orandi, lex credendi*. That's a Latin phrase meaning, literally, "the rule of prayer is the rule of belief."<sup>1</sup> You could put it more colloquially by saying that *praying shapes believing*. Some adjust that saying a bit, adding a third piece, so it becomes *lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi*—which is to say, *praying shapes believing shapes living*. In other words, what we do here matters, because it affects what we believe and how we live. How we live is really where the rubber hits the road.

Let's return to that question, *Why?* Why did Jesus die? I'd like to point us in another direction, with help from Occam's razor. To be perfectly clear, I know practically nothing about philosophy. But I think I get the gist of Occam's razor, which one online resource defined as "a philosophical principle that can be summarized by stating the simplest explanation is usually the best one."<sup>2</sup>

So let's apply Occam's razor to the crucifixion of Jesus. It seems to me that the simplest explanation comes from the plain reading of the gospel texts. This is what I read in them: Jesus was executed by imperialist enforcers because he preached and practiced an understanding and expression of faith that overturned the structure of society and threatened those in power. An illiterate peasant rabble-rouser gained enough traction to be dangerous. He had to go.

If we take that answer to *Why?* into our lives, then other questions follow: Who is still on the cross? Who is being sacrificed to maintain the structure of society? Who is being sacrificed in service to power?

I'm sure you can come up with your own answers, but first into my mind popped our children. The leading cause of death among children and teens used to be, as one might expect, *accidents*. Since 2020 it has been *firearms*. I only learned an appalling fact in the aftermath of the most recent school shooting, which took place only eleven days ago. Coincidentally, it happened at a Christian school about the same size as ours, which stirred up some extra feelings in our school community. Here's a terrible confession: I read that the perpetrator had killed three children and three adults and thought, *Oh, good, at least it wasn't more than that*. That's just messed up. It's also messed up that the shooting provided another excuse for scapegoating members of the transgender community, who are already on the cross in most states in the country.

Those who profess that “Jesus died for our sins” bear more than their share of the responsibility for the lack of progress on sensible gun control and for the rollback of progress for trans rights. But let’s be honest here: we are not without fault. Our society has put a lot of people on the cross; it has put a lot of creation on the cross. But let me speak for myself here by saying clearly that people and other parts of creation have been sacrificed for *my* comfort and security. My hands are not clean. I need to look at this square on.

Who is still on the cross? Who is being sacrificed to maintain the structure of society? Who is being sacrificed in service to power? On Good Friday and even into Holy Saturday, we sit with the crucifixion, and we sit with those questions.

I don’t mean to rush us past Good Friday and on to Easter, but the fact is we can’t *really* forget that the resurrection is coming. I don’t think we have to. True seeing takes bravery and strength. Maybe we get the bravery and strength for this moment precisely from the certainty of the resurrection.

Here’s that image from earlier: the universe collapsed in on itself, emptied not out but in, a sort of reverse Big Bang, and the vast expanse of all creation concentrated into a single burning ember hovering inside an otherwise lightless tomb. From it burns all the bravery and strength we need.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> [Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi – The Episcopal Church](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Occam's razor Meaning | Pop Culture by Dictionary.com](#)