

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: April 15, 2022
Sermon: Good Friday '22
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Call to Worship:

Leader: In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.
And the earth was formless and empty; darkness was
over the surface of the deep. And God said, *Let there be
light.*

People: And there was Light.

Leader: And God separated the light from the darkness.

People: And God saw that it was good.

Leader: God made the two great lights—and the stars. God set them
in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth,

People: And God saw that it was good.

Leader: When the time came, God spoke another Word:

People: A Word that had been with God from the beginning,

Leader: A Word that was God,

People: Jesus,

Leader: God's Son,

People: Our Savior,

Leader: Our Light.

(silence)

Forgive them, Lord, for they know not what they are doing.

People: Forgive us, Lord, for we know not what we do.

Message

David Johnson Rowe

It's Good Friday, and in our normally serene, simple, plain, lovely Church, we are surrounded by these paintings, 14 contemporized "Stations of the Cross," a

stark reminder of the awfulness of Good Friday. I preached on this at length last night; by now they literally speak for themselves.

This was Good Friday: the horror, the injustice, the chaos, the sorrow, the sacrifice. It's all around us. In more ways than one.

We are all devastatingly overwhelmed by the war against Ukraine. We are all devastatingly overwhelmed by the violence on the New York Subway this week. We're all devastatingly overwhelmed by so many injustices, so much that just isn't fair, not right, not good, we don't know where to begin.

My daughter has seen how upset I've been, so for my birthday she gave me three books, including poetry, by Ukrainian authors. And my son did the same, linking me to a rather spectacular Ukrainian author who paid dearly for his love of country—all this way before today's war. A reminder that evil has a long history.

Here's just a taste of that poetry emerging from years of Good Friday-like injustice. Two poems by Serhiv Zhadan about war and refugees and despair:

"WHERE ARE YOU COMING FROM?"

"Where are you coming from, dark caravan, you flock of birds?"

"We once lived in a city that no longer exists.

We have come here tired and ready to submit.

Chaplain, tell your people, there's no one left to kill.

"Our city was built of stone and steel.

Now we are each left holding only one bag.

A suitcase filled with ashes, gathered under fire.

Now we smell the burning even in our dreams.

"Tell us, why did they burn our city down?

Tell us they did not mean to do it.

Tell us the guilty will be punished, Chaplain.

Tell us anything that's not on the news."

"Well, I can only tell you about the losses.

Surely a final reckoning awaits the guilty.

But it awaits the innocent as well and

even those who had nothing to do with this."

(Serhiv Zhadan.

What We Live For, What We Die For.

"Where Are You Coming From?" (p. 27-28)

This second poem imagines the refugees in full flight from terror.

“TAKE ONLY WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT”

Take only what is most important. Take the letters.
Take only what you can carry.
Take the icons and the embroidery, take the silver,
Take the wooden crucifix and the golden replicas.

Take some bread, the vegetables from the garden, then leave.
We will never return again.
We will never see our city again.

We will never see our corner store again.
We will never drink from that well again.
We will never see familiar faces again.
We are refugees. We'll run all night.

We will run past fields of sunflowers.
We will run from dogs, rest with cows.
We'll scoop up water with our bare hands,
sit waiting in camps, annoying the dragons of war.
(Ibid. p. 28)

I start my Good Friday sermon this way because it is a reminder that the evils of Good Friday are universal and are with us still.

I often say at funerals, “We are not a Good Friday people. Good Friday is just the story of the unjust killing of an innocent man, and innocent people are killed unjustly all the time. Instead, we are an Easter people.”

Now, of course, on a theological level, Good Friday is much more. The death of Christ on the cross is our path to forgiveness *and* to eternal life. Extremely important, clearly.

But at its basic, it is still the awful death of a good man. Jesus was flesh and bone. Every awful thing done to him on Good Friday was done to flesh and bone.

Being the Son of God did not lessen the awfulness. Being the Messiah, being Holy, being good did not lessen the awfulness.

And such awfulness continues. Always. Everywhere. We are using the arts to deepen our Holy Week even more than usual. Charles Miller's paintings. Michael

Crowley's music. Our choir and soloists, the drama of Tenebrae, and Ukrainian poetry.

So the rest of this brief message is rooted in the Arts: three poems from the poetry book near you in your pew. Three glimpses into the soul and humanity of Good Friday.

Turn to page 44, the poem, "Ecce Homo." In Latin, it means, "Behold, the man."

First the backstory: Pontius Pilot was the Roman Governor. He was in charge of Israel that had been conquered by the Roman Empire.

After Jesus was arrested, interrogated, beaten, Pilot had Jesus brought out like a trophy, mocking Jesus and the Jews at the same time. They put a crown of thorns on his head, threw a purple robe on his shoulders, as if to say, "You Jews want a king? Well, here he is. This is what's left of your dreams." On page 44 is my poem, "Ecce Homo."

Ecce Homo (John 19:5)

Ecce Homo

Behold the Man!
you got that right
the day the sun was turned to night
this
was a man
divine and all
too human
not what was expected
not requested
not this "What a Friend We Have in Jesus"
no, not that!
not this "Jesus, Friend, So Kind and Gentle"
no, not that.
No "Jesus Lover..."
I want "All Hail the Power..."
I want "Onward, Christian Soldier."

Yet there he stands
Ecce Homo
behold the man
beaten, betrayed
consigned to the cross

a choice, for God's sake
a choice for Pete's sake
for Christ's sake
behold the man
abandoned.
Alone.

Good Friday is centered on the cross, not an easy story to tell, not a pleasant focus. This week lots of individuals plus several groups of people came through the Church to view these paintings. People called them powerful, violent, necessary, troubling, provocative, and again, violent.

Together, we all seemed to agree this is the way it was 2,000 years ago. "But where is the love?" several asked. "We see the sacrifice, we see the injustice and sorrow and agony, we see the dying and the death, we can feel the many feelings of that day. But where is the love?"

Especially since we are a Church where love is the overriding virtue. "Where is the love?"

It's hard to see the love on Good Friday. Maybe that's why we point to Easter so emphatically. But there is love within the cross we shouldn't overlook. My poem, "The Cross," makes us personalize the cross, to have the cross create the most intimate connection between Jesus and each of us. The first time I read this poem publicly was at an interfaith event at a synagogue. At the conclusion, a Jewish man told me it was the first time he understood why Christians could love the cross. Maybe this is the love for tonight. Turn to page 45.

The Cross

The Cross.
The loss.
The cost.
The gain for me
the win
sin-free,
somehow.

The miracle
the victory
the irony
all done for me
amazing grace,
somehow.

The life
the death
the love
the gift for me
too good to be
true.
Somehow.

Yet, the blood
the hurt
the cause
too close for me
too hard to see
somehow.

Yes, the tree
the curséd wood
shaped to a "t"
pounded by nails, by me,
twisted by pain's travail,
no pain, no gain for me
how quickly I see
the "t" becomes an "i."

I, the cause and effect,
I, the good thief and the bad,
I the Pilate, I the priest.
I the leper, I the least,
I, St. Peter, I, St. John.
I was there, I was gone
I, the mother
I, the crowd,
one hoping for salvation
one cursing out loud.
I, the centurion,
believing at last
I, me, looking at the tree,

bended knee,
aghast.

All this we experience tonight, all that the Deacons will read to us, all the music the choir will sing for us, all of Charles Miller's paintings that surround us, all of that reminds us that Good Friday, the cross, are God's love poured out for us.

Our last poem on page 47 is "The Lamentation." It is late Good Friday afternoon; the Jewish Sabbath is about to begin. Jesus's body must be buried quickly before the sun goes down, according to religious law.

The Roman soldiers make sure he's dead. He is. And it is left to Jesus's family to dislodge the body of Jesus from the cross, carefully, tenderly, lowering the body to the ground, and then carrying it to a nearby tomb for burial. In those moments, life, eternal life, hope, faith, our Christian religion hang in the balance.

A "lamentation" is a song of sorrow, of sadness; even stronger, of despair. One of the great songs of "Lamentation" from American pop culture was Peggy Lee's "Is That All There Is?"

Something important to us, something momentous ends, it's done, it's over with. And we're left with this great emptiness and wondering, "Is that all there is?"

Around the cross of Good Friday the air was filled with such "lamentation." Jesus had been such a good man. He inspired so much hope. He did so much good. He gave so much love. And now . . . it's all over? "Is that all there is?" And so I write, on p. 47,

The Lamentation (Luke 23:50-55)

The Lamentation
when time stood still
on a skull-shaped hill
stuck between crucifixion
and resurrection
with Jesus' life horribly ended
when hope and faith hung suspended
like the Christ
torn from the tree

one arm hanging
grotesquely free.

The crowd has left
the worst have done their best
the crucifiers crucified
the mockers mocked
the panderers pandered
the cowards gawked
and then went home
leaving a mournful few
alone
with sounds of sobs
lamenting
the loss of what was
and the unlikely
what could be.

In the last four minutes, I have raised two questions: "Where is the love?" on Good Friday and "Is that all there is?" after Good Friday. A big part of the answer is us. Jesus does his part. Easter is proof that love was on the cross. Easter is proof that this, all this, all around us, is NOT "all there is."

Jesus does his part. Our part is to live that love to such a degree that even the greatest despair, the deepest lamentation, the heaviest cross, the worst the world can throw at us, NO!! That is NOT "all there is."
