

GOOD FRIDAY MEDITATIONS, 2020 “THE WAY OF THE CROSS”

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#1 The Time of Trial

Luke 22:39-46

Jesus came out [from the Supper] and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. When he reached the place, he said to them, *“Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.”* Then he withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, knelt down, and prayed, *“Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.”* Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground. When Jesus got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, and he said to them, *“Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial.”*

We spend many of our days praying to be “saved from the time of trial.” We hope we will never face a situation that tests our faith to the limit. And yet today, the whole world faces a time of trial like we have never known before. The secure way of life we once took for granted has disappeared, and in its place have come rapid change, uncertainty, anxiety and real danger as infection threatens.

This is a time of trial, for everyone. We pray it will not bring out the worst in us. We pray we would not become people who would hoard, or push past others in the grocery store, caring only for our own welfare. We know the power of fear, and we pray that anxiety would not cause us to become callous or selfish, but instead that the power of God’s abiding and eternal love will carry us each day and shape us, even transform us to be more like our self-giving Lord.

In the time of trial we often feel we are alone, wrestling with life and wrestling with God. But we are not alone. Tonight we remember Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, facing his own time of trial, as vulnerable and human as he could be. We cannot know exactly what Jesus experienced in that garden, or how much he understood of what lay ahead for him. But we know that Jesus was wrestling with a fearful future. He called out to God for strength. *“Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me—yet, not my will but yours be done.”*

As we face a worldwide time of trial, and very little seems clear about the way ahead, one thing we do know is true. Our Lord is with us. Christ faithfully prayed his way through the time of trial before us, and Christ walks alongside us now, to sustain us and build us up. Scripture says in Jesus’ time of trial, *“an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength.”* And God gives strength to each of us, a measure of courage for each day, the spark of hope to keep us going.

We believe that in all things God works for good throughout God’s whole creation. Through every time of struggle, including this one, God continues working out God’s good purposes. So, we trust in God’s ultimate goodness. We rest in Christ’s abiding presence. And we pray for God’s protection in this time of trial.

#2 Trust Betrayed

Luke 22:47-53

While Jesus was still speaking, suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him; but Jesus said to him, *“Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?”* When those who were around him saw what was coming, they asked, *“Lord, should we strike with the sword?”* Then one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear. But Jesus said, *“No more of this!”* And he touched his ear and healed him. Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple police, and the elders who had come for him, *“Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a bandit? When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness!”*

In so many ways, trust is what makes human society livable. Trust forms the basis for healthy families. Trust makes friendships strong and marriages durable. Trust makes human communities work; it’s what holds together the institutions that structure our daily lives.

Today, though, these bonds of trust are being tested. The bonds of trust that hold us together as a nation have been frayed and weakened by polarization, partisanship, extremism and hate. In the midst of this pandemic, the bonds of trust are being tested even further. We may find ourselves asking whether the government structures that have been undermined for years by attack dog politics and conspiracy theories will turn out to be strong enough to carry us through this crisis.

Consider how, across the political spectrum, there is a lack of trust toward the opposition. All too often it seems that, instead of imagining that people with whom we disagree might also be motivated by love of country or a desire to do what is right, the reflexive movement of our time is to label them as “evil,” as “enemies of the people.” Consider how easy it is to believe every rumor about corruption or criminal behavior by someone on the opposite end of the political spectrum, and how often critical thinking disappears when it comes to sharing the latest dirt on social media. Every one of these attitudes and practices weakens the bonds of trust that are necessary for holding us together as a people, the bonds of trust that make it possible for us to work together, to compromise for the common good, to find our way together through challenging times.

Jesus knew the pain of trust betrayed. Judas was one of the twelve disciples, but he turned against Jesus and handed him over to the authorities. With a kiss, a gesture of greeting, Judas identified the one the soldiers should arrest. Jesus has been there. Jesus knows the pain we can inflict upon each other. But even more, Jesus shows us a different way. Jesus shows us what it is to remain steadfast and faithful – shows it by the way he loves his enemies and prays for them; shows it by the way he does not condemn Judas, but calls him to be accountable for his choice; shows it in his refusal to accept violence toward others as an option. In that steadfast and faithful commitment to the way of love, Jesus shows us the mercy of God that has power to save us all.

#3 Justice Perverted

Luke 22:66-71

When day came, the assembly of the elders of the people, both chief priests and scribes, gathered together, and they brought Jesus to their council. They said, "If you are the Messiah, tell us." Jesus replied, *"If I tell you, you will not believe; and if I question you, you will not answer. But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God."* All of them asked, "Are you, then, the Son of God?" He said to them, *"You say that I am."* Then they said, "What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips!"

Injustice can hide in plain sight. But then, suddenly, the disguises and rationalizations can be ripped away, so that the injustice is clearly visible—at least for those willing to see. Perhaps you've heard that the coronavirus is hitting poor communities and communities of color disproportionately hard. For example, in Chicago, even though African-Americans make up less than one-third of the population, they account for more than half of those who have tested positive for the virus, and 72 percent of the virus-related deaths.

For many public health experts, this comes as no surprise at all. Instead, it's the result of generations—long inequities, which have created completely different experiences of life for blacks and whites. For blacks, government redlining policies that began in the 1930s have resulted in black citizens living in "segregated neighborhoods that lack job opportunities, stable housing, [and] grocery stores with healthy food and more." Black Americans are more likely to work in jobs that do not offer the possibility of working from home, and instead place them at higher risk for being exposed to the coronavirus at work. "Longstanding inequalities also make African-Americans less likely to be insured, and more likely to have existing health conditions and face racial bias that prevents them from getting proper treatment." ("Black Americans Face Alarming Rates of Coronavirus Infection in Some States," New York Times, April 7, 2020) All of these injustices have been hiding in plain sight for generations, but the COVID-19 pandemic is making them visible.

At Jesus' trial, injustice was hiding behind witnesses and testimony and judicial process. But Jesus exposed that injustice by refusing to participate in the proceedings, and by naming the hardness of heart he saw in his judges. He knew his accusers would not listen. He didn't expect to be heard or understood or vindicated in that place, or in any place on this earth. He knew he would be vindicated later on, when *"the Son of Man [would be] seated at the right hand of the power of God."*

Jesus' unjust treatment reveals humanity's ongoing unjust ways with one another. The strong do as they wish. The weak have few options. There are people who do not receive justice and never have a fair or equal opportunity in life. The question before us is whether, having had these injustices revealed so starkly, will it make any difference when we rebuild on the other side. Will justice be a priority for us? Jesus calls us to seek justice, and to see where injustice hides. He has been there—he has been shut up and shut out, his cause ignored. And he calls us to stand with those who, in our time, are shut up and shut out, who are treated unjustly, inequitably. This is why Jesus endured unjust judgment. This is the reason Jesus went to the cross. To show us another way.

#4 Power Abused

Luke 23:13-25 Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, and said to them, *“You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. I will therefore have him flogged and release him.”* Then they all shouted out together, *“Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!”* (This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.) Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again; but they kept shouting, *“Crucify, crucify him!”* A third time Pilate said to them, *“Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him.”* But the people kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that Jesus should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished.

As the coronavirus pandemic unfolds, we hear stories of genuinely shameful behavior. There are senators who abused their power to protect themselves and their resources. They used insider knowledge of the virus’ spread and economic impact to sell their stocks before the pandemic’s economic downturn. There are people using their wealth to insulate themselves from the dangers faced by others. Those with vacation homes in the country are fleeing the cities, apparently with no thought to the impact they might have on the limited healthcare resources of those remote destinations were they to bring the virus with them. There are even people who are using other people. They buy up and hoard essential protective gear, hand sanitizer, toilet paper, to mark up and sell at exorbitant prices. Other people, for them, are just a resource to be squeezed. The common thread in all of these stories is the conviction that power and wealth and opportunity are to be used to serve one’s self.

The story of Pontius Pilate is the story of a man with power who used that power to serve himself. Pilate recognized that Jesus was innocent and made a half-hearted try to have him released. But in the end, he gave in to the desire of the crowd. Pilate is remembered, now, for his decision to let an innocent man be put to death. Even though he washed his hands of Jesus, his hands still served to put Jesus on the cross.

Jesus was a man without power, or so it seemed. He was betrayed by one of his own followers and abandoned by the rest. He was rejected and condemned by the religious authorities of his own nation. However Jesus is also the only one who retained his dignity. To the end, he remained faithful to what he was all about—forgiveness, compassion, mercy.

Pilate and Jesus stand as mirror images, each to the other. Pilate holds great power, but as he uses it for himself, he appears small and petty. Jesus holds no apparent power, but stays true to the God of all power, to whom Jesus had entrusted himself. Pilate is remembered primarily for participating in the death of an innocent man. Jesus is remembered as the one who changed history, who opened the door to a new future for humanity. We even count the years on our calendars according to his life. Jesus invites us, then, to reconsider our beliefs about power and what power is for, what is honorable and what is shameful, what is worth giving our hearts to and what is not.

#5 Persecuted and Humiliated

Luke 23:26,32-38

As they led Jesus away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus.

Two others, also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, *“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”* And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, *“He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!”* The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, *“If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!”* There was also an inscription over him, *“This is the King of the Jews.”*

The most extreme abuse of power comes when power is used to injure, persecute, and humiliate others. Boundaries are crossed by abusers, bodies are bruised, emotions assaulted, and spirits broken.

During this pandemic, while people are confined to their homes to limit the spread of coronavirus, a dangerous thing is happening. It is reported that domestic abuse is on the rise. There has been an increase in calls to crisis hotlines here in the US and around the world, as confinement intensifies dynamics that make some homes unsafe for women and children.

It’s heartbreaking to realize that “stay home, stay safe” measures intended to protect people are resulting in some becoming still more vulnerable. We pray for everyone who is facing this kind of danger, that their cries will be heard, that assistance will come in the form of shelter and protection. We pray that we ourselves will be of help when given the opportunity. Will reach out to those we’re concerned about, stay in touch, provide a lifeline of support through friendship. We pray that all people will be released from cruelty and abusive control. Our prayers and laments rise to God, who knows the pain of violence quite personally.

In scripture the phrase is brief – *“They crucified him”* – but the experience and meaning are profound.

On the cross, Jesus Christ took the pain of human cruelty into his own body. He went to the cross bearing the pain of every person who has ever been beaten or tortured, every person injured by war, every casualty of violence, every person wounded by the cruelty of others. Jesus carried this pain with him to that cross.

And there Jesus became helpless, so that he might bring help to this world. Christ put himself at humanity’s mercy, so that he might ultimately show God’s mercy to all of us. When we look to Christ’s cross, we see love and courage and sacrifice offered in solidarity with human pain. And because we know the end of the story, we also see hope.

6 Condemned as a Criminal

Luke 23:39-43

One of the criminals who were hanging there kept deriding Jesus and saying, *“Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”* But the other rebuked him, saying, *“Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence and condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.”* Then he said, *“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”* Jesus replied, *“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”*

The two men who died with Jesus were condemned as “criminals” or “bandits.” They might have been part of the Zealot movement which planned to resist the Roman occupiers and forcefully, violently expel them from the land. They might have been among the many poor peasant-farmers who were forced into debt by Roman taxes and their land taken away. Left without the means to make a living, some joined bandit groups in the wilderness, robbing and killing rich landowners as a means to survive. Or perhaps those two men on the crosses were simply thugs, thieves who plundered and stole.

To Rome, it didn’t matter. Rome only wanted to make an example of them, put them to death in a brutal, public way as a warning to anyone who dared oppose Roman order. People who were branded as criminals were regarded as less than human. They belonged outside of society, and so they were put to death outside the city walls.

But Jesus was in no way bound by society’s attitudes. Divine love gave Jesus eyes to see the hearts of these men who suffered on crosses side by side with him. Christ knew that what mattered in this moment of crisis was not judgment – what mattered was mercy.

So Christ gave us this beautiful example of mercy in an unexpected place. Amid people condemned to death, he spoke God’s promise: *Today, you will be with me in paradise.*

Today, in this pandemic, many people are suffering side by side. And we pray that mercy will reign amid the stress and struggle. We pray to follow Christ’s example of loving interactions.

It’s been said that we can never know what burdens a person is carrying. We can never know the reasons for the choices they have made. We can never know their story or their pain. So we are advised: Don’t judge. Instead, let mercy guide us. Let love flow through us. This word could never be more needed or important than today.

Mercy was always Jesus’s way, even on the cross. Jesus saw every human being as a person of infinite value, dignity and worth. Each one loved by God, with no one beyond the reach of forgiveness.

May Christ’s way be our way today. God’s dream is for a human family with all divisions healed, where no person is excluded. Jesus lived and died in the light of this dream, so this dream may illumine the world we are building in God’s love.

#7 Dying Alone

Luke 23:43-49

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, *"Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."* Having said this, he breathed his last. When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, *"Certainly this man was innocent."* And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

These days we cannot avoid confronting the reality of death. We see how fragile life can be, how suddenly and seriously people can be taken ill, some recovering fully while others slip away. Death has invaded our experience so abruptly that it is difficult to process.

An elderly woman in New York admitted that as much as she's afraid of becoming ill with the virus, she is even more afraid of the possibility that she could die alone, separated from family and friends. Too many people are dying alone in this pandemic. The loneliness and isolation are just compounding the heavy grief.

Yet the truth is that the passage through death's door will always be a solitary journey for each of us. Whenever we do reach the end of this earthly life, we may indeed be surrounded by loved ones, by medical attendants, and by other caring people who will accompany us as far as the doorway, but ultimately we will cross through that final doorway on our own.

It has been said, "We die alone." Alone, we face a mystery, an end to everything that we have previously experienced and understood. Even with the assurances of our faith, we cannot imagine what comes next. Is death a place of darkness? Is death a place of light? People who have returned from the brink describe an experience of deep peace. But truly, we do not know.

When Jesus faced his own death, he did not commend himself into a great unknown. His words were, *"Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."* At the point of death, Jesus gave himself to God. He commended himself into the eternal care of the Creator.

There is a promise here.

In one sense, it is true that every person dies alone. And yet—

Even into the place of death, Christ goes ahead of us, and Christ makes a way for us. On the cross, Christ passes over into death, and he will also pass over into new life. We too will pass over into new life with him.

The cross shows us a promise: We do not die alone.

When we die, we die into Christ. Into Christ's hands we commend our spirits. And in Christ's life we too find life.