

Reflection – On Trial
Scripture Readings – John, Chapters 18 and 19
Good Friday, April 3, 2015
Rev. Trajan McGill
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, Illinois

The title of the reflection: On Trial

We gather here tonight to hear a story. It is somewhat rare, perhaps strangely so, for Christians to join together as a congregation, as we do tonight, primarily to do almost nothing but hear and contemplate the words of scripture. These words, the Passion of Christ as told by John, pick up shortly after the last supper, and tell us of the arrest, the trial, the death, and the burial of our Lord, a sequence of events foundational to the Christian story. Brief words are spoken here only as a preface, a few thoughts to set our minds on the narrative to come, then we will follow this powerful story all the way from the garden to the tomb, interspersed with musical moments for contemplation of what we have just heard.

We are here because it is worshipful to meditate upon the magnitude of this event. We consider the magnitude of its wrongness—that the Son of God, come to save and preaching love, is taken and put to death. This offends our sense of right and wrong and opens our hearts to the desire that things be set right. It activates our conscience inasmuch as we recognize that it is we who crucified Christ, for if he died for our sins, then it is for our sins that he died.

We consider the magnitude of God's response—the puzzling, surprising, relieving fact that from death is brought life, and sin is met with grace. This joyful outcome, the resurrection, will be the focus of our attention on Sunday, but tonight we linger with the cross and the tomb, as those first disciples had no choice but to do. Knowing—which they did not yet—that after all of this Jesus is in the end risen is the only reason it is tolerable or makes sense for us to tell this story again and again as we do, and so it is with faith in the light that tonight we dwell in the shadows for a while. We can bear to pronounce out loud the dreadful rejection of God by humankind because we know that in confessing it we are handing it over to the same God, who saves us from it.

We acknowledge our own participation with contrite hearts, and this is important, but not in order to wallow in our wretchedness, nor to punish ourselves with our guilt. Our wretchedness and our guilt are real, but to bathe in these things for their own sake is to romanticize a despairing and adolescent notion of a tragic fate assigned to us, and to do so in order to penalize ourselves by bearing the weight of our own sins fails to notice that Jesus came to take that burden from us.

No, we bring this somber set of events before our minds, and we acknowledge our own part in it, because being distressed in conscience over things which are, in fact, objectively distressing, is a good thing. It leads to earnestness of the soul, to repentance, and to honest engagement with reality. It is worthwhile to set before us the reality of this event. Remembering real things that happened, that were important, and remain important, is itself important! We listen to the full story, not just the happy resurrection parts, because when we *see* Christ carrying our wrongs to the cross we get to see the reality of our sins being borne away from us.

Moreover, accompanying Jesus all the way to death in our meditations is worthwhile because every one of us will, in fact, someday accompany him all the way to death in reality, as well. In remembering that he really did go there, we remember that we are not alone when we ourselves go.

It may be enriching, as we hear these words read, to consider our own place in the story. Sure, we are abstract participants, as part of the world which condemned the Lord of love to death, but more specifically, I think we can probably connect every one of the individual characters found here to one or more of the motives and attitudes found in ourselves at various points. We may be bold, as Peter with a sword in the garden, and we may, as Peter does, also find the fearful denier within ourselves. We sometimes are the Judas. We at times are the Jewish police, trusting misguidedly in the orders we are given by the leaders of our own personal circle, or the priests, seeking to protect our faith from the danger of intrusion by God. We are the onlookers, not knowing what we are witnessing. We are Pilate, confused at the strangeness of this man Jesus, wondering at the nature of truth, but letting it be sacrificed when that is what the people demand. We hope that we may find in us glimmers of the perseverance of the three Marys, following Jesus all the way to the bitter end even as most others had fled, or the love of Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, tenderly caring for their Lord. And we pray that we may have in us the same mind that was in Christ Jesus, who laid down his life for his friends.

Good Friday is more than one thing. It is part soul-searching contemplation, consciously inhabiting the humanity that has rejected and killed God. It is part celebration of that God's love for us as demonstrated in accepting death from us in order to defeat it for us. And it is part finding hope for our own lives in watching the story of the disciples, identifying with their failures and fear, their denials and running away, their aloneness, sadness, and the deadness to them of their Lord; knowing that these same people who ran away frightened and confused, able at this moment to comprehend only defeat, were chosen by God, founded the Church, received the Spirit, spread the Gospel far and wide, and were, in the end, valuable and fruitful disciples, as we pray that, with God's help, we may be also; amen.