

Good Friday YA 2023

New Birth at the Foot of the Cross  
By the Rev. Salying Wong

[Walk around the altar.]

This place is so empty. Emptied of any fantasy that things are going to go well from here. Emptied of ego.

Last night, in this place, Jesus had a last supper with his friends. It was a very strange dinner. No one really had any appetite. Prior to dinner, Jesus turned the whole world upside down. They had just done the ritual washing at the local bath for the festival. So, when they came to the upper room, they expected the household slave to wash their feet, as was the custom. But, instead Jesus took the role of a slave and washed their feet. Outside of Peter who protested, the others were so aghast, they didn't say anything.

And then in the midst of dinner, Jesus started groaning and crying and saying, "One of you will betray me." He looked at Judas and everything about him had become hard as obsidian. Judas had become a hammer and he drove a nail straight through Jesus' heart. And Jesus cried and moaned. The one he loved had turned against him. Then Judas got up and left. Darkness rained down in sheets, obliterating even the stars.

After this, they lit their torches and went to the Garden of Gethsemane to do their prayers. It was here that Judas led the chief priests and police to arrest Jesus. Peter, zealot that he was, unsheathed his sword and cut off someone's ear. Things were escalating fast. Jesus intervened. "Peter, put your sword away. I know you always resist bad news. Shall I not drink the cup my father gives me to drink? I am here to walk through suffering, not avert it. When you avert suffering, Peter, you go sideways; you become Judas. Peter, remember this when the cock crows: you must go through suffering and let it buckle your knees and rend your heart. You must fall to

the ground and have nothing to grasp but God. Only here will you be able to receive what I've come to give—grace upon grace.”

“Did I not say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it shall not bear fruit. But if it dies, it bears much fruit? My hour has come. Since Judas drove a nail through my heart, I have been falling. And I am still falling, falling and falling. And when I am lifted on the cross, I will fall into the ground, the ground of God's being. By this act, there will be fruit, there will be abundant life on the other side. I go ahead of you to prepare the way, so that where I go, you might follow.

“So put away your clubs and swords. I shall drink the cup that my father gives me.” And Jesus healed the man's ear.

While Jesus was on trial at night, Peter lingered at the edge of the compound. He drew near the night fire to keep warm. The people there said, “Aren't you one of his disciples?” Peter defended himself, “I do not know the man!” No really, you sound like a Galilean. “I am not his disciple.” “But, I saw you there—you cut off my cousin's ear.” “I am not he!” And the cock crowed.

Peter paused when the cock crowed. Then, he raced out of the compound. He looked at the sky without stars. His face contorted and his teeth bit into his cheek. “But I...but he...but they...but...” Peter ran out of butts. And he fell and fell and fell, as his knees buckled, as he landed on the ground, as he wept till it seemed that every drop of moisture ran out of his body. Finally, silence fell over his body. [Silence] He moved his hand across the ground and he spoke only one word, “God.” The word was a placeholder for all that was lost, all that he could not get back, all that he wished had been, all that would never be. The word was also a placeholder for something he could yet put words to. For the first time he really understood it: he was not in control of anything. He could not call the shots on how his life or anyone else's would turn out.

So, Jesus was taken away to Pontius Pilate, who then gave him the worst punishment of the Roman Empire. The point of crucifixion was to degrade with pain. The point of crucifixion was to tell everyone else to keep in line. To be crucified was a long and excruciating struggle with asphyxiation. In order to breathe, you had to engage your muscles, which brought wretched pain. But, when you got too tired, you would sag and collapse upon your lungs and would not be able to breathe. Hours of this torture, till you passed out and let death take you.

To watch a crucifixion was an unveiling of the darkness in the human psyche. Out of fear of suffering the same, those who watched found themselves filled with an inexplicable rage against the crucified; it became moral outrage. "Save yourself! You wretch. You could have done something." Another might think, "This person must be worse than me, why else is he here and I am not." Some just fled. That is what the rest of the eleven did.

But not all. The women who accompanied Jesus along the way, who were also there at the last supper, stayed. And the "Beloved Disciple", though historically has been assumed to be the author of the Gospel, John, was actually an anonymous character, a stand in character. This Beloved Disciple was a disciple who was willing to stay at the cross and accompany Jesus in his suffering. And therefore, they were able to accompany their own suffering. Who could it be? Lazarus, Mary and Martha, the Woman of Samaria, Nicodemus, Peter—you? Jesus doesn't speak much from the cross in the Gospel of John. But he spends words to take care of the Beloved Disciple, giving them into the care of his mother. They now share the same mother—and the same Father, and so now a child of God. Born not of the flesh or the will of man, but of God.

Even here, at the cross, something is being born. A new birth, born from above. The Beloved Disciple did not avert suffering, did not go sideways, but stayed with Jesus, endured with Jesus, wept with Jesus, and was given a new birth.

Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it cannot bear fruit; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Jesus, as he was lifted up on the cross, fell to the ground of God's being. And so he goes ahead to prepare a place, so that all who suffer and go through their suffering, can follow him to new life. So, now, the silence, now the weeping, now the waiting, now the grace, and then Easter.