

Good Friday YB 2024

Lifted Up
By the Rev. Salying Wong

There's a lot of suffering in the world. There is suffering that is tragic, both personal and in our community and far away. There is suffering caused by evil and blunder; but, also suffering that is disease and no one's fault. On Good Friday, we spend time in solidarity with this suffering and refuse glib optimism that would superficially resolve the pain, the uncertainty, the questions.

Not only is the world's current suffering staggering, but when I look at human history—what we've done to each other and to God's creation—the immensity of our cruelty actually turns my anger into a sort of dull fearfulness and hopelessness. I had such an experience by accident this week. I was reading a book called *Ten Birds that Changed the World*. I thought this would be some light reading about the natural history of birds. But the story of the guanay cormorant disturbed me deeply. Here's an excerpt:

Since well before dawn, they had been hard at work, following the same routine as they did for 20 hours a day, six days a week, throughout the year....[Each day] long before sunrise, they arose from the thin grass mats...and began work in darkness...[they mined and] loaded the heavy and malodorous [guano]...Each man had to produce five tons—up to a hundred barrows full—per day. If they refused or disobeyed their orders, they would be summarily shot.

For sustenance, each worker was given a daily portion of rock-hard bread, dried meat and rice, usually infested with maggots...They endured conjunctivitis and a range of diseases [brought about by the guano].

[These workers were transported] into rickety rat-infested dangerously overcrowded ships...spent almost the entire time in virtual darkness...some jumped overboard, hanged, or stabbed themselves rather than face the horrors they knew would greet them...

[Between 1850 and 1874, an estimated 87000 Chinese were transported to the Chinka Islands of Peru. They were told they were going to California.] Once they arrived, they traded in one form of hell for another; the arduous work of obtaining the most valuable commodities in the entire history of global trade. Not the gold they had imagined they would be mining—but the droppings of [guanay cormorant for fertilizer].

Suddenly, I realized how much I don't know about the suffering of the world; not only that, the suffering of my own people. You know, before I realized what race was being enslaved, I assumed the people were Black. But, when I found out they were Chinese...well, it was the same feeling I got when I saw pictures of the lynching of Chinese people in California in the period of the Chinese Exclusion Act. In those blue bodies swaying under the trees, with tongues sticking out, almond eyes bulging, I saw what could have happened to my brother, my father.

The suffering took on a personal level that scared me. What would it be like for you to feel slavery and lynching come that proximate to your body? I recall, when Russia attacked the Ukraine and the Ukrainians were fleeing for their lives, how an Anglo priest spoke with awe about their suffering, saying “And, they look like us!” By “us”, he meant, White.

For most of us the immense suffering around us is an abstraction in Silicon Valley, with our general wealth, safety and sunshine. We might have deep sympathy, but we are unable to get proximate to the pain with our bodies, even if we wanted to, and most of us don’t want to. And yet, that is exactly what our God does in Jesus Christ. On Good Friday, we testify that when Jesus came into the world, he knew his destiny was to take up immense suffering; and out of immense love for all who suffered, he threw his lot with them. So, along with hundreds of crucified men on the hills outside Jerusalem, along with the Black slaves in America, the Chinese slaves in Peru, the Ukrainians murdered in the war, the people of Gaza, through the world, he put his body with their body and bore all that they bore. They were and are his friends. “There is no greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” Only God can go there, to all the invisible places of suffering, to abide with. There is no place where God is not. This is Good Friday.

Why do we call it Good Friday? Is suffering inherently good and redemptive? No. No, we call it Good Friday not because the day of crucifixion is inherently good, but because it is nevertheless God’s. Like the word Goodbye means, “God be with ye,” so Good Friday is God’s Friday. On this Friday, God plants God’s very self among the suffering. It is solidarity and it is proclamation. The cross unveils human evil for what it is—an affront to the purposes of God, purposes that God would have us repurpose with justice and love for the abundant life that God intends for all of creation. But, are we up for it? Where do we find the courage? More relevant for context, how do we find the time? “How?” was the question the disciples asked on Maundy Thursday. They confessed they did not know the way. Their hearts were heavy with sorrow.

Jesus showed them the way. He told them, in the Gospel of John, that he must be “lifted up”. In the Gospel of John, to be “lifted up” was three things all at once: lifted up on the cross, lifted up by his resurrection, and lifted up by ascension, in which he would abide in every heart that welcomed him. The simultaneous nature of being lifted up in three ways all at once means that reality isn’t just the crucifixion. In fact, this “lifting up”—Jesus called it his hour of glory. What can this be like? This is what I see when I meditate on this: I see Jesus on the cross; then I see love like honey light saturating everything. The cross does not disappear, but it does not dominate; love, which is God’s glory, bears all things. Only God can do this.

But this is hard to understand and believe. Jesus knew this, that it would be hard to understand and believe. In the Gospel of John, Jesus prepares his followers to live in the midst of this ambiguity by promising that he would be lifted up into them, with his ascension, so that he abides with them and they in him. He also gave them to each other, as a community to hold each other in love. Finally, Jesus gives them another advocate, the Spirit. All these things are still true today. We have God the father who loves us; Jesus with us; we have the Advocate; and we have each other. This solidarity is profoundly bigger than just an individual soul holding up

the weight of the world's suffering. We are protected from hopelessness so we can work the work of love and justice with this hope.

On this Good Friday, take courage that none are alone in their suffering. Love saturates the cross.