

Good Friday  
March 29, 2013  
The Rev. Robert H. Malm

## The Last Three Hours

This year I come to this Good Friday liturgy thinking that the story of Jesus' death is really all about time. We proclaim Jesus died "*once for all*." His death was long ago, and although we don't know the exact year, we do know it was during the time of the Jewish Passover, probably early in the fourth decade of the first century. In fact, our time, our history, is divided in what used to be called B.C. ("before Christ") and A.D. (*annó Domíni*, Latin meaning "year of the Lord").

The death of Our Lord reminds us that we are mortal, "*dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return...*" We have a limited amount of time to enjoy this physical life. The death of Our Lord also reminds us that love is stronger than death, love defeats death. Love empowers us to meet whatever suffering may come to us before death. The cross is a stark reminder of death's power and of death's defeat.

Long before the Gospels were compiled, St. Paul wrote of this paradox, this mystery of the cross and Jesus' death,

*The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God...we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called...Christ the power of God and the wisdom God...*

(1 Corinthians 1:18-25)

Paul also wrote that death is "*the last enemy to be destroyed...*" (1 Corinthians 15:26). Jesus died once in time, yet his death is experienced for all time as those who believe in God's love understand their own living and dying within the revelation of Jesus' life and death. Jesus trusted in God's love through the long hours of his crucifixion. So, too, we can find strength to face death as we trust in the same loving God; once in time, for all time.

Wendell Berry, the noted poet, has a collection of poems written over 20 years on Sundays as he walked across the country-side of his Kentucky farm. He called this collection *Sabbath Poems* and his ruminations span all the critical issues of human existence and the world around us. There is a "timeless" quality to his writing, a "*once in time, for all time*." In one poem, he writes about "*wayward-coming grace*." The cross, the death of Jesus, the words we use – atonement, sacrifice, expiation, propitiation, passion – only make sense to me as "*wayward-coming grace*."

Here is one of Berry's Sabbath poems:

*A gracious Sabbath stood here while they stood  
Who gave our rest a haven.  
Now fallen, they are given*

*To labor and distress.  
These times we know much evil, little good  
To steady us in faith  
And comfort when our losses press  
Hard on us, and we choose,  
In panic or despair or both,  
To keep what we will lose.*

*For we are fallen like the trees, our peace  
Broken, and so we must  
Love where we cannot trust,  
Trust where we cannot know,  
And must await the wayward-coming grace  
That joins living and dead,  
Taking us where we would not go—  
Into the boundless dark.  
When what was made has been unmade  
The Maker comes to His work.*

This “*wayward-coming grace*,” Christ’s passion, death and burial all happen in less than 20 hours, not even a full day. Of course the last 20 hours completely affirm all of Jesus’ ministry, all that he did, all that he taught: forgiveness; God’s mercy and love; the need for community, for trust, for courage; the battle with sin and evil. It’s all here – in 20 hours.

The chronology starts last night at about 10:00 PM in Gethsemane where Jesus is staying this last week in Jerusalem. It is a time of doubt, temptation, prayer. No one can stay awake and be with Jesus. What is even worse is Judas, abruptly leaving dinner a couple of hours earlier to go and conspire with the authorities. Jesus has warned Peter of the denials and betrayals to come. This time is often called “the agony in the garden.”

About midnight or later, Judas arrives with the authorities to arrest Jesus. Matthew, Mark and Luke report that a “*crowd*” came to arrest Jesus. John writes, “*a detachment of soldiers together with police from the Chief Priests...*” For John the arresting authorities are both Jewish and Roman. Some scholars think there could have been hundreds of Roman soldiers backing up the Temple police. They feared a riot, even in the middle of the night.

Interrogations by the Jewish religious leadership continued through the night. John tells us that it “*was early in the morning*” when Jesus was brought to Pilate’s headquarters. For an hour or two Jesus was questioned by Pilate and tortured by the Roman soldiers.

St. Mark notes that the crucifixion began at 9:00 AM (Mark 15:25). After the short walk from Roman Headquarters to the execution ground, Golgotha, the place of the skull. Jesus is stripped, secured to the large horizontal cross beam with nails and rope and hoisted up onto the vertical beam already standing, waiting for his body. Two criminals are there, one on either side. During these morning hours on the cross Jesus spoke words of forgiveness and hope, including the first saying John records. Jesus tells his mother,

Mary, and the beloved disciple, John, “...*here is your son...here is your mother...*” From that hour John took Mary to his own home to spare her viewing the final suffering of her son.

From noon until 3:00 PM, “*darkness covered the whole land.*” Then at 3:00 PM or shortly after, Jesus cried out and breathed his last (Mark 15:33 f.). During the last three hours Jesus spoke words of questioning, of hope, of trust, of accomplishment. Jesus’ work of saving, self-giving love, witnessing to God, is finished.

The soldiers had to make sure the prisoners were dead before they could lower their bodies off the cross. Joseph of Arimathea, “*a respected member of the Council, a good and righteous man, who had not consented to their purpose and deed went to Pilate and asked to claim the body for burial*” (Mark 15:48, Luke 23:50-50). All of this had to take place before dark.

Less than 20 hours for the “world’s salvation.” In some mysterious way the events of these 20 hours are compressed into the last three hours when Jesus cries out words of “dereliction,” “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” and words of triumph, “*It is finished.*” “*Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit.*” This is the paradox of faith, of this day, of this death. We question God, “Why, God?” “Where are you, God?” And, yet we know God is with us.

For some the death of Jesus leads to deep faith and trust in God. For others this death brings only questions and doubt. For any who observe this, who know this story, we should simply ask, “What difference does this death make for my life?”

For St. Paul the death of Jesus made all the difference. Paul was transformed from a Jewish leader who hunted down and executed Christians to become a devout believer in Christ and the greatest evangelist and theologian ever. He wrote his letters decades before the Gospel Passion narratives were compiled. His understanding of Jesus’ death is powerfully expressed in the letter to the Romans,

*We are justified by faith...through our Lord Jesus Christ...(who) died for the ungodly...Christ died for us...we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son...the death he died, he died to sin, once for all...So you must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus....*

(5:1-10, 6:10-11)

Paul had firsthand experience with sin and evil as he persecuted Christians. He “*locked up many in prison and agreed to condemn them to death...*” He was “*furiously enraged*” by those believing in Christ. (See Acts 26:4-11.) Paul was transformed by Jesus’ love, love transforming the death on the cross.

We have our own personal and public battles with sin and evil. Jesus fought this battle once in time for all time. At baptism we renounce sin and evil. Yet we fight all our lives. When life is over we hope to say with Paul, “*I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith...*” (2 Timothy 4:7).

In Jesus' day and in Paul's day the forces of sin and evil were more obvious, more discernible – Jewish zealots and hypocrites; Roman oppressors; uneducated, superstitious idol worshippers. Most people just tried to survive each day.

We have so much in comparison. Where is evil and sin in our world? In our lives? What are we doing about it? The death of Christ, the cross, this day calls each one of us to be accountable, responsible. We are called to do battle with sin and evil in our own lives, in this world, now.

Pilate gave into his fears and he had Jesus executed. The Jewish religious leaders gave into their fears and condemned Jesus for blasphemy. The disciples, Jesus' closest friends, ran away and hid, hoping not to be discovered, in fear for their own lives.

The death of Christ brings victory over fear. This victory can be ours; once in time, for all time. Watch for "*wayward-coming grace*." When you see it, know it, hold on to it and make it yours.

Isaiah 52:13—53:12

Hebrews 10:16-25

John 18:1—19:37