

I ---

Being alive is so, so good. God said so, right in the beginning. God looked at creation and said...it is good. It is beautiful, it is wonderful. It is vivid, and alluring, and delicious and hilarious --- life is the very breath of God.

And then, the book says --- the problem enters ---

That one tree --- don't eat that one tree.

What? Why? Look how good this all is...that one must be even better. Even better...more...power...autonomy...pride...

And the result? You. Will. Surely. Die.

II.

Death is a problem for me. How about you?
It is more than a problem. It is an affront.

Right now is what I know. Right now I am powerful --- at least in my own mind. Right now I choose these words --- I can change them. I can go further, I can withhold --- I can make mistakes --- I can make amends --- I can learn, and grow, and choose and ACT --- right now, life is beautiful and wonderful and vivid and alluring and delicious and hilarious --- by faith I believe that the very breath of God fills both my lungs and my consciousness ---- what could go wrong?

Death is a problem for me. It's the problem, really. All the other problems are just distractions...just manifestations of the reality that we feel and know and must reckon with, for surely it will reckon with us. We think we are too busy, too burdened, too poor, too in demand, too alone, too this, too that...

The ancient words...dust you are, to dust you shall return. You. Will. Surely. Die.

There's your trouble. It's an affront.

Why? I didn't ask to be here --- but here I am...and I like it...and it's all I know...and I wasn't in that garden in Genesis...even though the story sure does seem familiar...

And so, Good Friday. It begs some serious questions.
What are we to make of this death of Jesus?

I wish I were that holy...that this was the question I find myself asking. The real truth is that when I see this good man...this son of God...upon the tree...I ask...what does this mean for me?

I have recently read again a classic work of theology --- the author is CS Lewis, the much-beloved Christian writer of the 20th century ---

He fell in love late in life and was married to the American, Joy Davidman at the age of 58, in 1956. Joy died of cancer only 4 years later.

A Grief Observed is Lewis' raw, real reflection on his struggle with life and faith in the face of the reality of death.

The loss of someone you love, he said, is like the amputation of a limb.

“Talk to me about the truth of religion and I'll listen gladly. Talk to me about the duty of religion and I'll listen submissively. But don't come talking to me about the consolations of religion or I shall suspect that you don't understand.”

We were promised sufferings. They were part of the program. We were even told, 'Blessed are they that mourn,' and I accept it. I've got nothing that I hadn't bargained for. Of course it is different when the thing happens to oneself, not to others, and in reality, not imagination.

“My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it Himself.”

Good Friday tells us...this is God...helpless.

Listen to the word --- helpless. An affront to my sense of self, of being, of importance, of life...of pride.

Helpless...in this year, I stood and spoke at the funeral of a friend...killed in an accident at his workplace. A father, a grandfather, a brother, a husband, a beautiful, wonderful, living, breathing, laughing child of God.

I do not say that I am hopeless...but I do say that in those moments I was...and still now I am...I am helpless in the face of the death of my friend.

Good Friday...if we allow it...is a wicked task master --- there is no faking Good Friday. Death makes us helpless.

III

Death makes Jesus helpless...will you look and see it?

I love to say that God aligns God's self with weakness --- God is on the side of the oppressed and the brutalized and the homeless and forgotten --- but that doesn't mean I want to be those things... or that I even particularly want to look that direction...but Good Friday.

Jesus, the all powerful...the omnipotent, made impotent.

IV

How shall we resist this story?

I see several attempts in this 18th chapter of John, and I've tried them all, sometimes all at once.

Poor, poor Peter --- he fights. He draws his sword and slashes off an ear --- impressive! Until Jesus tells him know --- and then, confusion, and fear, bitter fear...and denial. If this is where this story is heading...then no, I never knew him.

Pilate argues --- and why not? He is powerful, and he lets Jesus know it. Look at the trappings of gold and brass and silk and linen and military might and government authority!

Jesus, dont you know my power...don't you know who i am? Answer me before you die like a dog on this Roman cross --- the answer?

Silence.

The Jews -- as John calls them -- religious authority -- defending God, defending certainty. Defending their faith from those who blaspheme and threaten!

The crowd...caught up in the mob mentality and the unmet expectations and the bribery and the anger and the sweat and adrenaline...they (we) scream --- not JJesus, we have no king but the President! The Prime Minister! The Mayor! Caesar!

I can see myself in them all.

But I struggle to see myself in Jesus. His way...truly it is narrow.

Good Friday flashes my mind back to the beginning of the gospels...to the desert...to Jesus, and Satan, that tempter from the Garden...take the easy way...no one will believe you if this is the messiah you turn out to be. This is ridiculous, it's unnecessary, it's confusing, it's painful, it's shameful, it's helpless.

And it is also human...and it is the only way. Could it be that there is not only God's strength in allowing...but that allowing is all there really is for us humans?

LC just went to Washington DC to practice some non-allowing over Spring Break. We went to learn from the United Methodist agency called the General Board of Church and Society. They sit across the street from the Supreme Court in a building built by Methodists in 1923.

We were greeted by the General Secretary of this agency, Rev. Susan Henry Crowe, whose office looks at the Supreme Court through one window and the Capitol through the other.

Today she published these words --

From the Syrian town of Khan Sheikhoun last week came the story of a woman who gave her name as Om Ahmed. In her deepest sorrow she said, "If the world wanted to stop this they would have done so by now. One more chemical attack in a town the world hasn't heard of won't change anything." Her voice cracking, "I'm sorry, my son died yesterday," she said. "I have nothing left to say to the world." (Washington Post, April 5, 2017)

With Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and all who are standing at the foot of the cross this day grieving the violence and death of our children, there is nothing left to say. The nausea, the void, the vulnerability, the emptiness pervade our bodies.

Eli Wiesel, in the book *Night* tells the story in the concentration camp.

"One day," writes Wiesel, "as we returned from work, we saw three gallows... The SS [guards] seemed more preoccupied, more worried, than usual. To hang a child in front of thousands of onlookers was not a small matter.

The head of the camp read the verdict. All eyes were on the child. He was pale, almost calm, but he was biting his lips as he stood in the shadow of the gallows... 'Where is merciful God, where is He?' someone behind me was asking. At the

signal, the three chairs were tipped over... Then came the march past the victims. The two men were no longer alive... The child, too light, was still breathing... And so he remained for more than half an hour, lingering between life and death...

Behind me, I heard the same man asking: 'For God's sake, where is God?'

And from within me, I heard a voice answer; 'Where is He? This is where – hanging here from this gallows...'"

On Good Friday, we see Jesus broken and emptied for the world. There is God, or the Crucified One) on the gallows, among grieving mothers, and torn creation.

Can't we fix this problem...here and now...tonight? No. Not tonight.

Tonight is not Sunday...it is Friday.

The best hope we have for tonight is that tonight exists.

That tonight exists is a mighty hope indeed. Who would have written the story this way...except God?

This story exists, and we re-tell it, tonight, for the 2000th plus time...which is really to say that we have told it from longer ago than we can imagine and will tell it beyond our imaginations can go forward.

Contemporary Christian writer Jen Hatmaker published these words on her blog today --- she says:

Some of you are simply enduring Good Friday so you can celebrate the victory of Sunday, where your heart lives, and I am so glad for you. I am. That was me last year and in years past. Seasons of wholeness and optimism and gratitude are so dear. **Cherish it, if that is where you are today.** Cherish the abundance of life after the tomb.

But for those of you hunkered down on Good Friday, identifying with the loss of this day in agonizing ways, *ways that you did not want to understand the cross*, I am your sister this year. When too many things still feel dead and resurrection feels as unlikely and impossible as it must have on this day all those years ago, I can't help but believe Jesus has his eye on us specifically. Who can better understand the cross than the man who

chose it? Who better to hold us close in our loneliness than the man who was left to suffer all alone? **Nobody, not one human being on this earth understands a dark Friday more than Jesus, well before anyone thought to put a “Good” in front of it.**

Because grief is, Good Friday is.

Because Loss is, and Rejection is and Pain -- is. Because life is wonderful, and alluring and vivid and hilarious and delicious...and fleeting in this world...Good Friday is.

Because I am helpless...Jesus is...with me...like me.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit -- Amen.