

April 3, 2026—Good Friday
The Rev. James Wyatt

Good Friday Stories

A poem by Daniel Berrigan, which I have posted at the sixth station back there, begins, “Once on a Friday we dare name Good” — because what can possibly be good about this? This is a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day, in the immortal words of Judith Viorst. This day makes no sense. This day, the one who said “I am the Bread of Life” is broken, the one who said, “I am the Resurrection and the Life” is killed, the one who said, “I am the Light of the World” is extinguished. How does this make sense? What does it mean? How does this fit into the story of Jesus and everything else we believe about him? How does it fit into the broader narrative of God’s saving works? Why did it happen? Who’s responsible for it? Was it God’s plan? Is it God’s fault? Or do we blame Judas? Or Satan? Or the Judean and Roman authorities?

Christians have grappled with questions like these ever since that very first, very bad Friday. We see that grappling even within the Gospel texts, which emphasize that Jesus’ death was part of God’s plan, but still place blame on the people who caused his death, especially Judas. We heard that in our Gospel reading today, when Jesus tells Pilate, “You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.” John clearly shifts at least some blame from Pilate to Judas, even while describing how Satan entered Judas and insisting that this is all part of the plan. So Christians have been wrestling with this from the very beginning, and they have come up with a LOT of different answers. Some of them are at least hinted at in the selection of other readings for this service.

So, for example, the image of the Suffering Servant found in the book of the prophet Isaiah is one way that Christians have found meaning in the suffering and death of Christ. This image was an embodiment of the long-suffering people of Israel in the time of the Babylonian Exile. But it’s also a powerful description of Jesus, and many Christians have read it as a prophetic anticipation of his passion. So we connect these two points in the history of God’s people—Isaiah’s Suffering Servant in exile and Christ’s suffering on the cross—and we create a sort of through line, a narrative where each story illuminates the other. Is that a satisfying narrative? Well, this story connects the suffering of all God’s people to the suffering of God in Jesus Christ, which I find comforting. On the other hand, it pretty much puts the responsibility for the death of Jesus squarely onto God: “It was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain.” I confess I find that image of God a bit troubling.

The Letter to the Ephesians offers a different narrative, using the language of “redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses.” “Redemption” is actually financial language, suggesting the money paid to a slave owner to liberate the slave. I think “forgiveness” is also financial language, oddly enough: in ancient law codes, when you caused harm to someone, you’d make it up to them by paying them money, in much the same way we might sue someone for damages. And forgiveness is when you waive the right to be repaid, just as you might forgive a debt. The letter to the Ephesians doesn’t say who is the recipient of these payments—whether it’s God or the Devil or Death—and maybe we’re not meant to take the metaphor too literally, only to know that, because of Jesus’ blood, we are no longer enslaved, and no longer accountable to pay for the damages we have caused. Is that a satisfying narrative? In my experience, it’s hard for us to wrap our brains around because it’s so firmly rooted in a cultural context which is pretty foreign to us now. I appreciate the theme of liberation, but the metaphor feels incomplete to me.

Psalms 22 can suggest a different narrative. This one gets a little weird. I’ve encountered scholars who tried to explain what it means that Jesus cries out from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” In their view, well, obviously Jesus was an observant Jew who knew the Psalms well, so when he quoted the first line of Psalm 22, he clearly intended to reference the entire Psalm. And if you remember the end of the Psalm, it says, “To God alone shall all who sleep in the earth bow down in worship; all who sleep in the dust fall before God.

My soul shall live for God.” So Jesus was not expressing a feeling of being forsaken by God, but rather he was looking forward to his own glorious resurrection! See? After all, that’s God up there on the cross, and how can God be God-forsaken? Is that a satisfying narrative? It seems to make the crucifixion just a minor inconvenience on the road to Easter Sunday, don’t you think? And I think it might border on heresy by denying the full humanity of Jesus—because feeling abandoned by God sure is a part of being human. To me, the God-forsakenness of God on the cross is an important part of this story, showing me just how completely Jesus took part in human life, and I’m not willing to hand-wave that away.

Another narrative informed by historical study of the Bible is that Jesus’ death was the consequence of his prophetic stance: speaking out for God’s justice, criticizing the Roman Empire and the religious establishment, launching a movement that those in power perceived as a threat. The blame for Jesus’ death in this story falls squarely on those forces that seek to maintain the status quo of power and domination. Might this be a more satisfying narrative? You’ve probably heard echoes of this story in my preaching, so you might well guess that this story resonates with me. I think this story suggests that we should emulate Jesus, resisting the forces of Empire at any cost, even at the cost of our lives. And it also shows us what that resistance can look like—loving each other, celebrating life together, refusing to be divided from our neighbors, no matter who they are.

Another narrative understands the crucifixion in the light of the incarnation. In Jesus, God became fully human, and experienced the full breadth of human life, including the most brutal pain and death. In the words of poet Jay Hulme, from a poem I have posted back there at the twelfth station, “where else / in the ashes of / creation / will I ever / see a God / who weeps / like me” Might this be a more satisfying narrative? You’ve also heard echoes of this story in my preaching before. I find tremendous comfort in thinking of God literally sharing my suffering, so that I am never alone in it.

Yet one more narrative is rooted in a metaphor that Jesus uses in the Gospel of John: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” This story links the crucifixion of Jesus intimately with his resurrection, so the death of Jesus was a step toward the transformative power of the new life he brings to birth in us. Might this be a more satisfying narrative? As theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether suggests, it shifts the focus away from any glorification of suffering, and focuses instead on the full flourishing of life and humanity that God offers us.

The thing about any good, intriguing story is that you can never really be sure whether it makes sense until you get to the end. You might be racking your brain trying to figure out “whodunit” in a good mystery novel until the very last page, or eagerly turn the pages of a romance until you finally get to the happy ending you know is coming even when you can’t quite see how. But it’s on that last page where you can finally see how all the pieces fit together. And we’re not there yet. Early Sunday morning, at the Great Vigil, we’ll take a step back and look at the whole sweep of stories of God’s saving deeds in history.

But today, on this terrible, horrible, no good, very bad Friday, I think it’s worthwhile to sit and wrestle with the questions without settling for simple answers. I’ve touched on six different ways of understanding the cross of Christ, and there are more stories in our Scriptures and tradition! So don’t believe anyone who tries to tell you that there’s only one correct understanding of this upside-down day—our tradition is much broader, much richer, and much more nuanced than that. None of these stories are simple or perfectly clear, none of them will fit easily on a bumper sticker or a billboard. That’s the thing about stories—they are not concise dictionary definitions, and they tend to twist out of your grasp if you try to hold them too tightly. But also, our stories matter—our stories tell us who we are and shape the way we live our lives. So find the story that’s satisfying for you, where you are in your spiritual journey right now, acknowledging that it might be a different story than the one that worked for you five years ago, or ten, and different still than the one that will work for you five or ten years further down the road. Sit with a story that helps transform you into a better version of you, one that’s closer to the likeness of Christ in you. And may we all live into those stories as we continue our walk together toward Easter resurrection and beyond. Amen.