

“Needful”  
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky  
Good Friday – 25 March 2016  
John 18:1 – 19:42

No words, no symbols or artefacts, suffice to explain or even describe what happened in the story we just heard. It stands alone, invincible to expansion or elaboration, tempting every humble preacher to stand down from the pulpit and sit in silence, pondering the meaning behind this event, but it deserves some meager attempt. So let me start with the simple observation that all of the principal players in the story agreed that Jesus needed to die.

For the religious high council in Jerusalem, Jesus posed a threat to their authority and to civic order, which they viewed as identical. In fact, numerous false prophets claiming to be the Messiah stirred up the people from time to time, often resulting in chaos and harsh Roman reprisals. “Caiaphas . . . advised that it was better to have one person die for the people,” and he meant it sincerely.

Of course, he said more than he meant, serving as an unwilling prophet, because as we know, Jesus did die for the people, just not in the way Caiaphas expected. And apart from the risk, Jesus offended. For those who claimed that they knew, better than anyone else, how to interpret the Law and the prophets, Jesus failed to qualify, miserably, as a Messiah, making him a pretender and blasphemer.

For Pilate, Jesus presented an ambivalent, frustrating case. Preoccupied by the Passover, with Jerusalem a tinderbox of religious intensity, Pilate wanted to keep a close watch, hoping for order, preparing for the worst. His position depended on running things smoothly, so this situation with Jesus probably annoyed him.

Why the rush? Lock him up with Barabbas until a more opportune time. But the pressure applied on Pilate worked. He examined a rather uncooperative Jesus, yet found no grounds for a death sentence. However, afraid of the influential people pushing him for a decision, Pilate took the safe, practical, expedient, convenient path. Kill him. He needs to die to clear my desk, for the sake of moving on to more pressing matters.

As for the peripheral players involved, we find mixed opinion and a diversity of motives. In John's account, no crowd assembles to demand Jesus' death. The whole exchange occurs between Pilate and Jesus' accusers. As for the seasoned soldiers who cruelly tortured and crucified Jesus, we think of them as psychopaths, but to them, just another job. Perhaps part of their viciousness came from the fact that Jesus saddled them with a chore they all detested: dirty, smelly, boring work for a proud, dignified legionnaire.

The disciples – well, what to say about those disciples? Judas betrayed Jesus for reasons not entirely clear. Obviously dissatisfied, but with no indication of murderous animosity, perhaps Judas harbored disappointment that Jesus failed to meet his expectations of Messiah: the classic, Davidic, violent type at the head of an army of liberation. I doubt Judas wanted Jesus to die. More likely, he planned to push Jesus to make a decisive choice, and there Judas succeeded, though not in the way he hoped.

As for the rest, with a few exceptions, the disciples vanished, went into hiding, their world shattered, their hopes for the future in serious jeopardy. Jesus predicted all of this, repeatedly. He explained why, but somehow it escaped them, or perhaps the shock and dread of it actually happening stunned them into forgetfulness and incomprehension.

For them, Jesus needed to live, not die, to complete the mission, to bring the kingdom to fruition. In his death, they lost their reason for living. Jesus always knew the next destination,

but with him gone, they broke down, except for a trio of women and a nameless male disciple who watched Jesus die on the cross, a courageous act, simply being present in that moment.

Like the principal players in the Passion story, we too agree that Jesus needed to die, though for very different reasons: to cleanse our sins; to offer a pathway for forgiveness and reconciliation; to make us worthy in the sight of God to receive grace; for Jesus to go ahead of us to prepare a place where we might dwell with him forever; to demonstrate in the most profound way possible God's invincible love for the whole human race and every single member of it, including each one of us. That's why we call this awful day Good Friday, a bizarre irony for people familiar with the story yet devoid of faith.

However, like some of the peripheral players, specifically the disciples, deep sadness weighs down our hearts when we contemplate the crucifixion, and rightly so, because the real villain in the story, the sin of the world, comes partly from us: from our obstinacy and arrogance and pride; our waywardness and forgetfulness; our vengeance and lust for power; from an endless list rooted in our primal desire to supplant the crown of God's sovereignty. As Isaiah prophesied, "he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises, we are healed."

Here, in our sin, we find complicity in the crucifixion and ample comparison with those principal players: the pious elite offended by Jesus' radical, uncompromising message of freedom for all who abide obediently in the law of love; the busy governor, Pilate, annoyed by the distraction. So we wish, with regret and futility, that God had chosen another way, a less painful way, both for Jesus and for us. Surely, a God so great, with limitless power and knowledge and wisdom, with limitless choices, could have found some alternative to the cross, but for reasons that remain a mystery, only a cross sufficed.

On this day, we must live in the tension of our sin and God's forgiveness. In John's version of the story, there is no "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." John makes us wait for the resolution of our dread and remorse. For on this day, Jesus simply says, "It is finished," and though we already know what the next episode brings, today we're left hanging, like Jesus on the cross, buried in sin, bereft by the conflict between God's majesty and the horrible magnitude of what we have done, for it is, like the cross, needful. Amen.