

Title: *Were you there?*

Scripture Reading 1. **Matthew 26:36-46**: Then Jesus went with the disciples to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.” And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, “My God, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.” Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, “So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

Scripture Reading 2 **Mark 14:43-50**

Immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; and with him there was a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, “The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard.” So when he came, he went up to him at once and said, “Rabbi!” and kissed him. Then they laid hands on him and arrested him. But one of those who stood near drew his sword and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to them, “Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But let the scriptures be fulfilled.” All of them deserted him and fled.

Scripture Reading 3 **Luke 23:32-38**

So they took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha.

Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, “My Lord, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!” The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”

Scripture Reading 4 **Luke 23:44-49**

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun’s light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “Father (Lord), into your hands I commend my spirit.” Having

said this, he breathed his last. When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, “Certainly this man was innocent.”

The last summer I worked at Camp Friedenswald in Michigan our week of worship services took the campers through the Gospel of Luke, which meant that toward the end of every week, we reenacted a crucifixion for the whole summer. Luckily, I was too young to think that this might be in poor taste, though the first week when Jesus was being fake beaten with bright yellow Wiffle Ball bats, I did recognize that was not quite the ethos we were going for. Despite our naiveté (or, perhaps because of it), that was a pretty powerful scene – the death of Jesus remembered there the woods of Southern Michigan. Johnny Eicher played Jesus, and he was a pretty good actor, and his final cry out to God – his final anguished breath – that brought me to tears every week. I think that this was the first time in my life that I had associated the cross with suffering – growing up in the church, and attending four years of college as a Bible major – I believe that before seeing this reenacted by Johnny Eicher, I never before associated the cross as execution, the cross with suffering.

And at the end of that scene, Dave Moser the camp director, he would tell a story and crouch down to the level of the campers, and say to those of us who had just witnessed this reenactment, “*one of the hardest things to do in this life is to look suffering in the eye.*” That line has stuck with me.

Suffering, theologically speaking, is a difficult and curious thing. The suffering and pain in the world, this has probably caused more people to walk about away from the faith than any other idea – many of us cannot hold together the ideas of a loving God and the great amount of

suffering all around us. And at the same time, suffering also can lead to the deepest faith – it often seems like those who have walked through some of the most painful parts of life have the deepest faith I have encountered. The realities of suffering, it seems, result in one choosing to walk away, and another to walk deeper toward the arms of God.

Some cultures are better than others at facing suffering. Those with fewer defenses and resources seem to handle it better than we do. On the whole, we Americans have a hard time with scenarios of pain and suffering, because we have the idea that all pain can, and should be fixed. Our mind-boggling technology and national wealth have allowed us to relieve so much suffering that we have begun to believe it should not exist at all. Where it persists, we work hard to end it – we employ experts, raise awareness, and have fundraisers – we bring all our own best values to bear and are often shocked when we do not see quick results. And sometimes, when results do not come, we withdraw or numb ourselves to these painful realities. We know how to relieve suffering, and we know how to evade it. What is hard for us is to confront it when we have no power to make it go away.

Without question, the guests that are the hardest for me to deal with at Corpus Christi House (Boise's homeless day shelter) are those who are suffering the most. The guests who get on my nerves the most, who can agitate me quickly, these are the guests who I know, are never going to get well – their addiction, their mental illness, their trauma – is too severe. It will not be overcome by anything we humans can do. They might get put on a new medication, which helps for a time. They might get housing, which puts them somewhere else, for a time. They might go to jail where they will get clean, for a time. Without fail, these are the people who are

the most difficult to deal with, because *one of the most difficult things to do in this life is to look suffering in the eye.*

We want to take the suffering out of the cross. And we have done a pretty good job of doing so, I think. If I can grow-up in the church and never associate the cross with suffering, I think this is a good sign of the ways we have tried to remove pain from the cross (at least in the Protestant traditions). Take this cross for example, our cross.¹



I know that, before my time here in Boise, there has been at least one city-wide controversy over the cross at Table Rock. I don't have many thoughts on it being there one way or the other, but I

¹ In Boise at "Table Rock" there is a large cross that stands above the city, it is illuminated at night. There have been multiple city-wide debates on whether a Christian symbol like this should stand above our city.

do have some thoughts on the sign that sits next to it:



I am pretty sure that if Jesus was just a good citizen, living a happy life they would not have bothered executing him. But, this is of course what we have done with the cross, we have sanitized it – we have forgotten that it was an instrument of torture, that those who strung Jesus up on it did it in the name of God, they did it to defend their religion and their nation. We might even say that Jesus was executed in the name of “Good Citizenship” and “Happier Living” for those in power – for those who determined what good citizenship and happiness were to look like. But we don’t want to look above our city and think about suffering, *because nothing is as hard as looking suffering in the eye*, and so we instead think that the cross’ meaning is about being a nice and happy person.

Perhaps this is the primary reason that so many people turned from shouting “Hosanna” one week to “Crucify Him!” just days later. They didn’t want a Messiah willing to suffer, willing to forgive. That does not make for a very good god – a god that does not take away our pain or lightning bolt our enemies, this is not a very good god at all. They wanted a Messiah to deliver them how they wanted to be delivered: they wanted God to be on their side, rather than

wondering if they were on God's side. And so, never mind what God wants – never mind how God works – we want God as we want our food: to have it our way. And quickly. So, crucify him. Crucify this God who doesn't end pain and suffering; crucify this God who does not take-up weapons to defend our claims; crucify this God who forgives those who kill and betray him; crucify this God who would rather be with the poor than attend the Governor's Prayer Breakfast; crucify this God who does not lightning bolts and hell-fire missiles on those we hate; crucify this God of fierce and uncompromising love.

Christianity is the only world religion that confesses a God that suffers. It is not all that popular an idea, a God who suffers, even among us Christians. We prefer a God who prevents suffering, only that is not the God we have got. What the cross teaches us is that God's power is not the power to force human choices and end human pain. It is, instead, the power to pick up the shattered pieces and make something holy out of them – not from a distance but right up close.²

This is the God we meet in Jesus Christ. This is the God of the cross – the God who did not flee from the pain and suffering of this world, but entered into the very worst suffering. This is *God with us*. Thanks be to God. Amen.

² From Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way*.