

"I Was There (The Big Picture)" The Rev. Aaron M. G. Zimmerman
(4/7/2023, Good Friday)

Let us pray. Almighty God, hear the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts. The always acceptable in thy sight, oh Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

55 years after the end of the American Civil War, on a cotton plantation, on the banks of the Mississippi River, a boy named Riley was born. His grandmother raised him and was a church going woman. And it was at the Pentecostal Church of God in Christ in the little town in Mississippi, that Riley learned to play the guitar. And about 50 years after that, he met some Irishmen who had recorded a song. And in 1988, they released when love comes to town, in which you can hear BB King saying, I was there, when they crucified my Lord. I held the scabbard when the soldier drew his sword, I threw the dice when they pierced his side. But I've seen love conquer the great divide. You heard that passage described in the Gospel reading where the soldiers take Christ's last earthly possession his tunic. And they said to one another, Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see who will get it. And that is what the soldiers did. John 19:24 and 25.

Isn't that just like people to miss the point? God is dying in front of them. And they're arguing about who gets the soon to be dead guy's t shirt.

Today, for me, it is it is on every good Friday, this odd juxtaposition with this day of great solemnity, where we talk about the death of God. And the world just spins on. Congress debates about budget cuts. weapons manufacturers keep the assembly lines going. Couples squabble. Kids disobey. People do what they do. folks go to work. Folks post things online. We just continue about our business. As if it's no big deal that God died, I was reminded of this very powerful this tendency that we have to kind of miss the point. Several years ago, when I was at the place where you think you couldn't miss the point, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, in Jerusalem, and you can go there. And if you ever get the chance, I highly recommend that you do. And you spend some time amidst the throngs of tourists and you wait in line as long as you have to wait in line to get to the altar that is located over the place where Christ died. And as you approach that altar, you will be invited to kneel. And to put your hand on the bedrock that was the bedrock 2000 years ago, and put your hand into a hole which is where the Cross would be lowered. Christ was not the first person to be crucified at that spot outside the city walls. It's where it always happened. And so there was a hole in the ground hewn into the rock where you could drop the vertical piece of the cross so

that the criminal could be hanged. And so if you go into that space, I defy you not to be moved. But then when you come outside of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, turn around and look at the building. And you'll see about three storeys up on the outside a wooden ladder. That ladder has been there about 180 years. What do you have to know about the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is that it is controlled and shared by about seven different denominations of Christian churches. And if you've been in church long enough, you know that Christians don't always get along. And those different denominations can't quite agree as to who first went up with that ladder to do the maintenance on the outside of the church, and so as not to offend? or step on toes, the ladder remains. God died. And yet, we Christians argue about who put the ladder there. And who should take it down. I won't do it. I didn't do it, you did it. No, you did it. That is like us. And I get it, I understand we see the cross everywhere. It's on the roof of this building. Maybe some of you are wearing it around your neck right now. And so it's something we get used to. But on Good Friday, here is the big picture that you are not to miss. The cross is the instrument of torture on which God dies. Brutally, horrifically suffocating in between breaths, to get out the words to care for his mother, to get out the words to tell those standing below him that he's thirsty.

The death of God is staggering. And this cross tells us that's how God works in the world.

What it means is simply this, it's God recognizing the truth, that all of the pain and all of the sin and all of the suffering and all of the anguish and all of the tears and all of the paralysis and all of the anxiety and all of the addiction and all of the shame and all of the fear, all of that which you are trying to carry. You cannot and God who loves you, and who knows that he is the only one who can carry it does so. And Good Friday is here to remind us of that. That there is no loss too big. No grief too eviscerating. No humiliation or reversal. So complete, no sin so outrageous that it falls outside the scope of God. If God can die, if God can die, there is no dark corner of humanity where God cannot be present. Because he dies, as the worst of the worst, was such a total catastrophic annihilation. It means that God lives in the dark. Good Friday, lays bare the truth of us humans. It's a day where we are invited to look at reality, which is not something in general that we like to do. It's a moment a little bit like that in 1955, when a 14 year old boy was lynched in his body thrown into the river. And the mother of Emmett Till, a very public funeral in Chicago, decided that not only would the casket be present, but the casket would be open to the entirety of the funeral. It's one of those moments that forced the people there and the nation to realize this is us. Which is why in the Gospel reading, we all take part in that taking the part of the crowd, the only moderately good person besides Jesus and his mother is pilot. Who's saying, I'm not sure we want to go down this road. We don't take pilot's voice, the voice who has some doubt about the course of action. We take the voice

of the crowd that wants to put their foot on the gas and get as quickly as possible to the death of the miracle worker, the healer, the Compassionate One who is merciful to senators who let them off the hook all the time, who only had critical words for religious people. That's the guy we want to get rid of. And that's what good Friday wants us to see. That we He can throw the worst

at God and God will take it. There is no part of your life. No disastrous chapter in your history that can separate you from what God wants to do. There is no death which you have suffered or are suffering or will suffer that is a place that God can't work. Good Friday invites you to look at reality. The death of God I know that that is for you.

I was there when they crucified my Lord. I held the scabbard when the soldier drew his sword. I threw the dice when they pierced his side. But I've seen love, conquer, the great divide. Amen.

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