

“AT THE CROSS” part 1

Luke 23:44-49, Psalm 31:1-17a

March 5, 2015

Rev. Janet Robertson Duggins
Westminster Presbyterian Church

When we hear the stories of Jesus, we sometimes like to imagine ourselves part of those stories – kneeling at the manger with the shepherds, listening to him teach and tell stories, looking on as people were healed and multitudes fed and the sea calmed, sitting with him at the table as he breaks the bread.



But we don't so often picture ourselves in this scene, do we? In fact, we may go out of our way to avoid it. There's so much ugliness, brutality, and suffering in this scene that we don't want to see it, and we certainly don't want to get too close.

It's not that the cross is unimportant to us; it's the most recognizable and evocative icon of our faith, a powerful symbol of sacrifice, self-giving, and commitment – of Jesus himself. But we don't like to think too hard about the fact that before it was a beautiful and cherished sign of our identity as Christians, it was an instrument of torture and execution for a law-and-order government with little tolerance for dissent. So we shy away from the passion stories, as the gospel accounts of the crucifixion of Jesus are called, except for a quick read-through during Holy Week – though even then many of us prefer to go straight from Palm Sunday to Easter.

During this Lenten season, though, we're inviting you – inviting us all – to linger a while at the cross,



as we think about what the cross – the crucifixion – of Jesus has to teach us ... about Jesus, about ourselves, about what it means to be human, about the life of faith to which we are called. We're going to focus particularly on the interactions of Jesus on the cross, as the

different gospel writers describe them... what are sometimes called the “seven last words” of Jesus, although of course they are more than just words.

It might seem odd to begin with what sounds like the end of the story. But this is where the story is going, and we know that already. Of all the questions we want to ask – and there are many of them – the biggest is “why did Jesus have to die?” The short answer is “because he was human.” He was one of us, and all of us will die. It’s not a comfortable or easy subject to talk about, death. We avoid it, talk about it in euphemisms, pretty it up, distract ourselves, fend it off, do everything possible to extend our lives and hang on to youth, try to buy some sort of immortality or legacy ... but in the end it makes no difference.... Death is part of the human experience.



So in a way the crucifixion is an important counterpoint to the nativity which proclaims “God with us.” The crucifixion says, “not just *with* us, but one of us.” In becoming one of us, the One who was God with us, accepted death as part of the deal. His last words convey that: “Father, into your hand I commit my spirit,” that is, my breath, my life. He is acknowledging that his life came from God and belongs to God and returns to God. At the end, he yields himself to that fundamental truth.

But in fact, Jesus yielded himself to that truth long before he was nailed to the cross,



long before they led him up that hill, long before he was condemned in a sham trial, before the crowds turned on him, before his friends betrayed him. In his whole life, Jesus committed his spirit – his breath, his life – into God’s hand. His whole life was, in a sense, a dress rehearsal for this final yielding.



And that's why this seems a good place of beginning for Lent, a good word to ponder. Because we who want to follow Jesus must understand that following him means committing our life, now and at its end, to God. Yielding to God. Trusting God.

This isn't something we're very good at. We don't trust easily. We like to be in control (or to believe or pretend we are) of our own lives and destiny. We don't like uncertainty. We aren't all that sure we trust God or that we want the same things God wants. Even when we want God, we want God on our terms. And when things look bleak we want a way out.

But at the cross we see Jesus' radical trust in God. The words we hear from him echo prayers from the psalms, prayers he grew up with. "Into your hand" echoes the words from Psalm 31: "You are my God, my times are in your hand."

Jesus beckons us to follow him into this radical trust in God.



Biblical scholar Walter Bruggemann writes:

"This God may have the whole world in his hand. But what counts is that my times are in your hands – my times of well-being, my times of joy, but also my times of grief and despair and failure, my times of death, especially my time of dying, are in your hand. The psalm says, it is all in God's hand. And Jesus says, into your hand I commit my life." (p. 38)

"...in whose hand are our times? In the hand of fear, of greed, of anger, of guilt, of cowardice? Or the hands of love, mercy, and justice?"(p.39) ... the hands of God?

Let this Lent for us be about yielding our spirits – our breath, our life – to God ... putting our life – now and next week and next year and at its end, however near or far off that may be – into God's hands.

Resources:

Into Your Hand: Confronting Good Friday, by Walter Bruggemann, 2014, Cascade Books