

Good Friday Liturgy, March 30, 2018. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church  
Nigel Taber-Hamilton Isaiah 52:13-53:12, Hebrews 10:16-25, John 18:1-19:42

This moment, this liturgy, speaks for itself. We've just heard the story – it's not one about a victim swept up in events beyond his control. It's a story of someone who, through his choices, finds himself exactly where he expected to be, even if he also very much hoped that it would not all turn out this way.

The human Jesus was committed to bringing about a transformed Israel, and – though he knew that it was the longest of long shots – a transformed Empire, too. As a skilled reader of human thoughts, emotions, motivations, desires, he could have written the script before it played out in real time, in real events, in the bloodiest of ways.

We've spent 2,000 years trying to figure out the theological implications of what happened on that Friday, so long ago.

One thing that's becoming clearer and clearer is that the language that sees Jesus as the paschal lamb – coming from the quite natural and obvious temporal link between Jesus' death and the Passover – isn't as helpful now as it might have been then.

Or perhaps, the way we've come to interpret it isn't as helpful. Like so much in the New Testament, Jesus as the paschal lamb – in John's words, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" – is intended to be a contrast statement, not something that's supposed to be similar - to be "like" – when compared, but is seen as an opposite.

When the earliest believers said that "Jesus is Lord" they were taking a title from another setting – in this case Roman imperial language around Caesar – and appropriating it, re-purposing it for a different usage. Saying that "Jesus is Lord" is also saying "and Caesar isn't."

That's a dangerous thing to do!

Saying that Jesus is the true lamb of God isn't saying "like the Passover lamb" it's saying "the way you understand the working of God in history is to be different than that of your ancestors. So not like the Passover lamb; in fact, quite different than the Passover lamb – a different sort of lamb – one who chooses his fate, not one who has no choice.

Part of that "different" has to do with a rejection of the language of victimhood, AND a rejection of a view of God as vindictive, angry, and wrathful and therefore in need of being appeased or placated.

Somehow, that development of the theology around the cross didn't actually 'get' that difference, and so we have inherited several theories, many of which are quite vindictive: that on the cross Jesus paid a blood sacrifice to an angry God; that Jesus died in our place; that Jesus paid a ransom to Satan to free us.

It's taken some time, but now we're coming to what I would call a more mature understanding of Jesus and Good Friday, which is often referred to as Jesus as the epitome of an authentic moral life. We say that the core of Christianity is about positive moral change – the transformation of ourselves and the world – about being authentic, and we are called to live this way because that's how Jesus lived and died. The purpose of everything Jesus did was to lead humans toward this transformation, this moral change, this authenticity.

All of this was the basis of everything he said and did – through his teachings, through his example, through his founding of a religious community that became the Church, and through the inspiring power of his martyrdom and resurrection.

All of that is summed up in this day, in his willingness to accept death as the final exclamation point on his earthly life. In this, we have the supreme example of living (and dying) for others, of choosing the way to transformation, and to God, no matter the cost.

That is, in part, I believe, why we can call this day “Good,” and why it can serve not simply as an example but also as a gateway into that fuller life that his life and death proclaims so loudly.