

Grace with Boldness
A Good Friday Homily
Bob Stillerman
Community Good Friday Service, St. Stephen UMC
Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9
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On Monday afternoons, I have a ritual. I walk through our sanctuary at the Sardis Baptist Meetinghouse on my way to the church kitchen for a cup of coffee. The empty room tells a story. Life has been here. And God's presence, too.

A dozen or so bulletins are scattered on empty rows; and a chair or two, or even three look out of place. A hymnal lies open to Amazing Grace; someone's forgotten their reading glasses; and another's forgotten his coat. I see a Wrigley's chewing gum wrapper and a YETI mug with a tiger paw.

During the special liturgical seasons, there's more to see. The week after Christmas, I notice Fraser fir needles in the carpet from wreathes and a Chrismon tree that have aged with the season; And poinsettias once so red and vibrant have now begun to dry up – their leaves are limp, and they drape over decorative red and green paper. And those Advent candles, once perfect, thick cylinders of purple, and pink, and blue have melted and mutated into craggy stubs. Even the Christ Candle has lost its geometry.

And this past week, it was palms. Their scent hung thick in our little hall, and already, they'd begun to brown and wither. How could that be? Just twenty-four hours ago, they'd danced in the hands of children young and old, each one of their branches smiling and basking in loud hosannas.

Each Monday, as I look upon this special room, my heart is filled with a mix of joy and sadness. My heart is full, because, here, in this place, I have felt the tangible, palpable presence of God, in the company of people I love. And all at once my spirit and my soul leap to those perfect moments, wishing I could catch them like lightning bugs in a Mason jar.

But a part of me is also empty, because these moments are fleeting – Paul Tillich says flashes of God's presence are like the vapor of a cloud: they are here and then they vanish. And the next thing I know the benediction has been spoken, and we've scurried out the door to get in line at the K&W before the crowds overtake us. And all that remains in the room is a fingerprint of yesterday's congregation.

On Mondays, I'm left to wonder, "Will Sunday ever come again?"

I have confidence. And I have hope. But still, it's not yet Sunday. So I must wait.

I know it's Friday, but it sure feels like a Monday afternoon.

On that first Good Friday, I wonder if the earliest Jesus followers asked that same question: “Will Sunday ever come again?”

Just last night, not even twelve hours ago, we were sitting with Jesus, and sharing bread and wine. In fact, the supper dishes are still sitting in the sink, caked with crumbs. He told us he loved us; he told us he trusted us; he told us to be servants to one another. And this table was alive. And we left it singing in the night. And oh how we wanted that moment to last.

And now, now this room is empty, and lifeless, too. The wine cask emits a musty scent, and a lone chair sits noticeably vacant; and all that separates us from Golgotha is a thick, wooden door. And we sit huddled in this now-dark room, hoping it was all a bad dream, hoping that if we close our eyes, and grit our teeth, and clench our fists, and pray just a little harder, we can turn back the clock twelve hours, we can avoid the pain of the cross, and we can linger once more in the presence of God.

This, friends, is where I think Friday leaves us: we’re left to contemplate the fleeting nature of life, both Jesus’ and our own. And we wonder: “Will Sunday ever come again?”

In this period of discernment, the writer of Hebrews offers us helpful insight. In the Christ, we find a high priest – one who has known the fullness of God by being a pastor to each of us. Here is One who has walked with us; One who knows what we know: pain and joy; grief and sorrow; love and laughter; disappointment; anxiety; the full range of the human experience, even death. And as a human being, in both his living and his dying, Jesus, more than any person we’ve ever known, offered a life fully and wholly attuned to the will of God.

It was this obedience, the writer tells us, that allowed Jesus to find a security and a truth in God unmatched by the systems and powers of this world. Here was one, Stanly Saunders tells us, who declared bankruptcy from the social, political, economic, and religious systems of the present, and invested his entire portfolio into the possibilities of God’s future: God’s world. In so doing, ordinary moments became extraordinary in his presence: A Samaritan woman found living water; the faith of four friends healed a paralytic; five loaves and two fishes became enough to feed thousands.

It was also this obedience that steeled Jesus for Friday. And so he headed into the teeth of the authorities, confident that God’s course was his course. He approached the throne of grace with boldness. And God provided mercy and grace in his time of need.

Friends, this Friday (and every Friday) will bring inevitable endings – an end to this service, an end to a relationship, an end to a career, an end to a school year, an end to a life, even an end to your favorite pair of blue jeans – endings are just unavoidable. But in the Christ, we are shown One who approached endings with a confidence in the redeeming powers of His maker.

This Friday, we wrestle with the ending of Christ’s life and ministry here on earth. For we are still held captive to the limits of this world’s thinking. Caesar has condemned Christ to death on

a cross, a fate that cannot be reversed. And another earthly system, our grammatical system, tells us we must punctuate Christ's last phrase with emphatic finality: "It is finished." PERIOD.

But how soon we forget. Christ declared bankruptcy on the systems of this world, even its grammar. And with the boldness of grace, he tells us to rethink our punctuation: "It is finished..."(ELIPSIS). It's mysterious. And it's a mark that bids us to stay tuned.

Friends, It's Friday, and we are surrounded by crinkled bulletins widowed from their inserts, and withered palms, and empty chairs. It may seem like it's final. It may seem like it's the end. But...

Sunday's comin' y'all.

May it be so.

And may it be soon.

Amen.