

“Not So Good Friday”
Psalm 22 – March 25, 2016

INTRO: Psalm 22 is the chosen Psalm for Good Friday. And the beginning words of this Psalm may sound familiar, because the Gospels recount these same words—this time words Jesus spoke, during his crucifixion. “The distress is palpable. Certainly the gospel writers understood Jesus as taking on the experience of the psalmist and all who would pray this prayer, embodying the sorrow, the loneliness, and the abuse reflected in this psalm.” (Amanda Benckhuysen)

There are good days, and there are bad days. We’ve probably had a few of each, this week. Given the tragedy in Belgium, it may have been hard to find the good ones. Yet we get to today, the TGIF day, and we love Fridays! For many people it's the last day of work for the week and the beginning of the weekend. It reminds us that the good plans for Friday or Saturday and Friday gets us started on that good stuff. Today and tomorrow are high travel days at the airport—people flying off to some great spring break destination. So, for most people Friday is a good day.

Today is specifically Good Friday. But we might better call it Bad Friday, since it’s the day we mark as Jesus crucifixion. When someone we love and admire dies, we generally don't call it a good day. When someone who's been our mentor and teacher dies, we generally don't call it a good day. When someone who's saved our life dies, we generally don't call it a good day. When someone says, as Psalm 22 indicates, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest," those aren't words which indicate it's a good day. (vv. 1-2).

For Jesus, this journey towards the cross had been going on for some time. There were already clues that things might not end up well. But in the early morning hours on this Friday we call 'good,' it began to unravel fast. It started when Jesus was arrested, bound and taken to religious authorities for questioning. Things got worse and the Roman governor got involved, then washing his hands of the affair. A crowd of mean-spirited people clamored for a criminal to be released instead of Jesus. Pilate, the governor, had Jesus flogged, but the crowd on hand demanded his crucifixion. There's nothing looking good about this Friday. Then, Pilate remanded him to Roman functionaries to be crucified -- and you know the story. The words from this Psalm are fitting for what some of that experience might have been for Jesus. He was "poured out like water," his "bones are out of joint" and that his "heart is like wax" (v. 14). His mouth "is dried up like a potsherd" and his tongue "sticks to [his] jaws" (v. 15). His "hands and feet have shriveled" (v. 16). This was a bad, bad Friday.

Yet Presbyterian pastor, Rev. Willie Thompson says it also was a good Friday. For many years, Thompson taught confirmation classes in his church. Without fail, when his students talked about the crucifixion of Jesus, teenagers would ask him, “Why do we call it 'Good Friday,' when there was nothing at all good about it?” Thompson explained that the day itself was as bad as it could possibly be for Jesus. He suffered terribly. But, because Jesus died, he tells the confirmands, the day became good for all of us. It was a good day because: Jesus saved us from ourselves, from all the things we’ve done that have separated us from God and each other, and his dying became Jesus’ way of taking those sins away. Through his death, Death, itself, was defeated. He experienced resurrection, and so will we. In Christ, we are reconciled to God. He gave us the example of sacrificial love, and in him, we see a model for how we might live our lives in relation to others. For these reasons, and more, what was a bad day for one person, was a good day for humanity.

But there's another reason this Friday is a good Friday. The "good" in Good Friday has a meaning other than "beneficial, auspicious, happy, positive" and so on. "In Old and Middle English, the adjective god (good) could mean 'pious, devout, morally perfect,' so the good in Good Friday is a linguistic relic meaning 'holy.'" (*Word Myths, Debunking Linguistic Urban Legends*)

Good Friday is "good" because it means "holy." Holy Friday. So, if it’s a holy day, how can we observe it as such? We may gather together to worship. Some religious traditions observe meatless Fridays, and we may find ourselves at a fish fry tonight. But it’s probably more than a choice about our diet. We make our lives holy by how we choose to live them.

The other evening, on the same day of the Belgium tragedy, there was a major fire at a southside Milwaukee apartment complex. Passersby and apartment residents themselves, were credited with saving the life of some of the other residents. One woman said she’d never really met her neighbor,

but had regularly seen the sign on her neighbor's door which said to not smoke, because the person inside was on oxygen. So, she knew what she had to do—get that resident out of her apartment. The able bodied neighbor, set aside her own quick exit of the building to help the person who could not fend for herself. A sacrificial act, a holy act.

In the movie, *Saving Private Ryan*, we hear the story of the Ryan family, and how three of the four brothers were killed in World War II. Because that family had already lost three sons, it is determined that the fourth brother, James Ryan, must be found and brought home immediately. Captain John Miller receives orders to find Ryan and bring him back from the front and even though Capt. Miller and his men go through great difficulties, and even the loss of lives, James Ryan comes home. In the epilogue of the movie, old James Ryan is standing with his wife, his son and grandchildren at Capt. Miller's grave years after the war is over. Addressing Capt. Miller's grave, old Ryan says, "My family is with me today. They wanted to come with me. Every day I think about what you said to me that day on the bridge. I tried to live my life the best that I could. I hope that was enough. I hope that, at least in your eyes, I've earned what all of you have done for me."

John Biguenet, writing in *The Atlantic*, asks, "But don't we all struggle under Ryan's moral burden? And how can Ryan, or, for that matter, any of us, ever pay such a debt -- and to whom? Like Private Ryan, we cannot help but ask what we've done to deserve such sacrifice by others, and beg their forgiveness for what we have cost them. And like James Ryan, all we can do to justify that sacrifice is to live our lives *as well as we are able*."

Today is not a bad Friday. It is a good Friday. It is a holy Friday. And as we live lives which honor God and demonstrate love and Christlike values and virtues, we ensure that every day, is a good and holy day.

(Much of this sermon adapted from one in *Homiletics*, March, 2016)

--Sue Burwell