

Good Friday, March 30, 2018, 6:00 PM

By the Reverend James Ross Smith

Isaiah 52:13–53:12; Psalm 40:1–11; Hebrews 10:16–25; John 18:1–19:42

From the Gospel of Matthew, “Jesus said, ‘Every one then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock . . .’”

For many people who work in this neighborhood, this building is an oasis of peace in a noisy neighborhood. On Forty-seventh Street, they’re building a new high-rise hotel. It will take them three years to finish it. Right now they’re digging the foundation. As some of you know, the island of Manhattan sits atop a layer of bedrock. This bedrock, Wikipedia tells me, is composed of “Mica schist, known as Manhattan schist. It is a strong, competent metamorphic rock created [over 300 million years ago].”¹ The bedrock is extremely hard and so it’s not easy to dig a foundation for a sixty-story building in Midtown Manhattan.

The other day, I went across the street to talk to a man who’s working on the building. He told me that for the last three or four weeks at least they’ve been

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manhattan#Geology>

“chopping rock,” to carve out that deep foundation. Once that’s done, they’ll need to sink “rock anchors” into the bedrock, and it is upon those anchors that the structure will eventually rise.

On Tuesday, up at the cathedral, we sang a hymn called “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood.” It’s a nineteenth-century hymn, written by an English Baptist preacher named Edward Mote. The spirituality of the hymn is very evangelical. The hymn doesn’t talk about the church, the saints, the sacraments, or good works. It’s all about Jesus. The refrain, based on Matthew 7, goes like this, “On Christ, the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand, all other ground is sinking sand . . .” Edward Mote has taken Jesus’ words—“Every one then who hears these words of mine . . .”—and has intensified them and made them intensely personal. In Mote’s hymn, Jesus’ words are not the rock. Jesus is.

From Saint Paul’s letter to the Galatians, “You foolish Galatians! Who has cast a spell on you, doing so in spite of the fact that in my sermons a picture of Jesus Christ marked by crucifixion was painted before your eyes? Tell me just one thing! Did you receive the Spirit because you observed the Law, or as a result of the

proclamation that has the power to elicit faith?”² How amazing this is: for Paul, our faith is not, first, about conceptual things like ethics or philosophy, though those things are important in their own way. Jesus comes first, because, Saint Paul says, Jesus is the Son of God, and he has made it possible for us to become God’s sons and daughters. He has given us the Spirit. And he has set us free from bondage to our idols. And Paul teaches his people all this by talking to them about Jesus’ *death*—in his preaching, he “[paints] a picture of Jesus Christ marked by crucifixion.”³ Why does he do that? Wouldn’t it have been more impressive if he’d told them that Jesus was a great hero who’d laughed in the face of death and come back victorious to impress us with his mighty acts? But Paul doesn’t think that way. That’s the world’s wisdom he says. His *foolish* wisdom begins with Jesus’ death on the cross, even though he knows that, in the law, crucifixion was a curse, not a blessing.⁴ Paul talks about Jesus’ death on the cross, because, for him, everything that Jesus did and does, including his dying, is a gift. Jesus empties himself for us. He *dies* for us. His death on the cross is a blessing. It *is* a mighty act.

² Galatians 3:1–2, translation in J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible 33A) (Doubleday, 1997), 5.

³ Galatians 3:1

⁴ Galatians 3:13.

From the book of the Prophet Isaiah: “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed.”⁵ Jesus is rock. Jesus is Son of God. But he is also Son of Man. Jesus suffers. Saint Mark tells us that in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus is not serene. He is not Socrates in the bath, anticipating his death with equanimity. Jesus feels anxiety and pain in every fiber of his being. He wishes his friends could just stay awake for a little while, so he wouldn’t have to pray alone. And yet, in the end, he empties himself. He accepts the loneliness, not because he wants it, or welcomes it, but because it seems to be a part of the Father’s will. He asks the Father to “remove the cup from me,” but the father does not, or cannot, do so, perhaps because “this cup” is not about one man’s death. Some would say that “the cup” is the cup of judgment upon sin and death itself. Jesus dies, as we will, too, one day. And Jesus’ death encompasses that terrible truth. Jesus’ death, in some mysterious way, takes in all the dying that has happened, and all the dying yet to come. That’s why Jesus’ death is “for us.”

⁵ Isaiah 53:4–5.

From the Book of Common Prayer, “We thank you Almighty Father, because you sent your beloved Son to redeem us from sin and death, and to make us heirs in him of everlasting life; that when he shall come again in power and great triumph to judge the world, we may without shame or fear rejoice to behold his appearing.”⁶

Almost from the first, Christians have believed that Jesus Christ is Isaiah’s suffering servant and that he was, and is, able to bear our griefs and carry our sorrows. He does not deceive us. He cannot simply remove our pain and grief, or wipe away our tears, with a wave of his hand—not in this life anyway. But, still, he is our shepherd. We are his flock. We are his friends. He knows that we are vulnerable, because he, who is God, allows himself to become human, and to become vulnerable, too.

“Vulnerable” is a word that means capable of being wounded. All of us are vulnerable, because we are human. We are not made of stone, and neither is Jesus. Paradoxically, Jesus is our rock because he allows himself to be weak, to be wounded.

⁶ Preface for Advent, Book of Common Prayer, 378.

“Vulnerable” is not a word that I use too often. The word embarrasses me a little. Who would ask a farm worker, or a refugee, or someone who is dying, or somebody who is depressed, or grieving, or frightened to be “more vulnerable”? Surely they are already vulnerable, because they are already *wounded*. They are already vulnerable because they are human, just like you and me.

Still, “vulnerable” is a word that has its uses. Brené Brown, a therapist, teacher, and researcher uses the word, because she wants to remind us that none of us actually wants to be *wounded*.⁷ Why would we? And the reason we put armor over our wounds, she says, is because we feel shame. We feel shame all the time. It is a thing that unites us. The badly-paid farmworker feels shame and so does the billionaire. People feel shame because we are nothing at all like rocks. We are not perfect, and we are not impervious to pain. We make mistakes all the time. We don’t always live up to our parents’ expectations or our teachers’ or our own. Sometimes we make mistakes that are sinful, and sometimes that sin becomes a habit that we can’t seem

⁷ https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability/up-next?language=en&utm_source=tedcomshare&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=tedspread. I am grateful to the Reverend Edward Sunderland for this reference.

to break. And then we feel ashamed, though it kills us to admit it.

Jesus endured “the shame and the spitting,” as the hymn puts it.⁸ He endured mockery, abuse, pain, and even death, in order to free us from the terrible cycle of shame, so that we might be able to face God as we truly are—fallible, struggling, wounded, but unafraid and without shame. And he does this in part to keep us from taking out our shame on ourselves or others. He does not ask for blame or vengeance. In Saint John’s Passion, as we just heard, he gives us to each other—mother to son, son to mother, friend to friend. And then, he says, “It is finished.”⁹

Last night Bishop Shin told us that we are “at the mercy of God’s love.” To be at someone’s mercy means that we are not able to control that person. Ordinarily, that is a terrible thing. But not with God. No matter what we do, God keeps on loving us.

From the Lamentations of Jeremiah, “My soul continually thinks of [my affliction] and is bowed down within me. But this I call to mind, and therefore

⁸ *Pange lingua*, No. 166 in the *Hymnal 1982*

⁹ John 19:30.

I have hope: the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning . . . Therefore, I will hope in him.’ ”¹⁰

In a little while, we will venerate the cross of Christ. This ritual has sometimes been referred to as “creeping to the cross.” I have never really liked that phrase, because all of the things that we do on this Good Friday are meant to remind us that, because of Jesus, we do not have to “creep.” We are meant to stand before God without shame or fear, not because we are perfect, but because we are sheep of our Savior’s fold, lambs of his flock, sinners of his own redeeming.¹¹ He is our rock because he is steadfast. He helps us to rise and rise again, and rise at the end. And that is why we look to him upon the cross and call this Friday good.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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¹⁰ Lamentations 3:20–23.

¹¹ Book of Common Prayer, 499.