

**Good Friday**

**March 29, 2024, 12:30 PM**

**Propers: Isaiah 52:13–53:12; Psalm 40:1-11; Hebrews 10:16-25;**

**John 18:1–19:42**

**by the Reverend James Ross Smith**

**From Psalm 8:**

O Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,

the moon and the stars that you have established;

what are humans that you are mindful of them,

mortals that you care for them?

Yet you have made them a little lower than God

and crowned them with glory and honor.

You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;

you have put all things under their feet,

all sheep and oxen,

and also the beasts of the field,

the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,

whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

O Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

*Psalm 8:1,4–10, NRSV, Updated Edition*

It is strange to read those words in this time of war, when violence, brutality, fear, and rage have infected so much of the world. Can we believe those words? Are we actually meant for glory? There is no easy answer on this Good Friday, but the psalmist is not wrong, is he?

Human beings are capable of great ingenuity. We are creative, we are problem solvers, are we not? There are many examples. But consider, for a moment, this one example. Consider *longitude*. The National Ocean Service reminds us of that, “Lines of longitude, also called meridians, are imaginary lines that divide the Earth. They run north to south from pole to pole, but they measure the distance east or west.”<sup>1</sup> And using lines of longitude along with those lines called latitude, you can pinpoint any place on Earth with great accuracy. Now,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/longitude.html>, accessed March 28, 2024

the funny thing about these lines is that they are simultaneously entirely real and completely imaginary, and it is only human beings that can take a paradox like that and make it work. But it wasn't easy. The ancient Greeks worked on the problem and Chinese and Arab astronomers did as well, but it was only in the eighteenth century, thousands of years after all those ancient astronomers, that the problem of longitude was solved by a determined band of mariners, astronomers, and clock makers.<sup>2</sup> Human beings are nothing if not persistent. William Shakespeare, who had clearly read Psalm 8, put it this way, "How noble in reason, how infinite in faculties"<sup>3</sup> are we human beings. Learning how to plot longitude made modern life possible: safe, efficient, accurate travel and shipping by sea and air; space travel; carefully plotted time zones; GPS; Google Earth, the realization that we live in a global village, connected to our fellow human beings on the other side of the planet. None of this is possible without longitude. But there is a darker side to this discovery: without longitude there are also no missiles, no rockets, no surgical strikes, no armed drones, no plans to militarize outer space. Thus the paradox: "You have made them a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor," but also this, "In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust and to dust you shall return."<sup>4</sup> We cannot help but ask, are we made for glory or for oblivion? It is our fate, I think, to live with that question. It is our calling to confront this tragedy: we have been given great gifts, but often we treat those gifts very badly.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Longitude>, accessed March 28, 2024, but originally Sobel, Dava, *Longitude: The True Story of a Lone Genius Who Solved the Greatest Scientific Problem of His Time* (Penguin, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Shakespeare, William, *Hamlet, Act II, Scene 2*

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 3:19

“O Lord, what are humans that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?”

And that is a very good question: why *does* God care for us?, why should he, after all? True, we know how to solve problems. We appreciate beauty and sometimes we do beautiful things. And, yet, we are erratic, unpredictable and uncertain. Our mortality frightens us. It is a problem that we cannot solve on our own, and this enrages us and hurts our pride. We may be ingenious, but our fear of death cripples and blinds us. We interpret the world wrongly and badly. We seek immortality in inert things. We try to bury our fears under mountains of *stuff*. We are dishonest with ourselves; we deny our fear, our rage, and our weakness. We *externalize* those things. We put them out *there*, in other people, in *them*, always *them*, not us. And so, we become suspicious and envious, even when we have the chance to do good. All too often when humans gain power, we use it badly. We invent slavery and warfare and empire and exclusion. And in all of this there is, I think, a terrible thing, there is *estrangement*. In Genesis, human beings are expelled from Eden. God places a fierce angel, wielding a sword, to keep us out of the Garden.<sup>5</sup> But in the end, I think it is we who keep ourselves out of Eden. We do not speak the Garden’s language. We do not know how to live there. God made us for glory, honor—and for love. But such language has become strange to us. We have become *estranged*: from the person we were meant to be, from each other, and, most fatefully, from God. And how terrible a thing *that is*: to believe that God is actually a stranger.

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<sup>5</sup> Genesis 3:22–24

Whatever we make of that fierce angel at the entrance to Eden, we would be wrong to believe that God is hiding from us behind an angel's fiery sword. As Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, suggests, we should not read the first three chapters of Genesis as proof of our depravity or our inherited guilt. Brueggemann reminds us that God tells the humans that if they touch the Tree, they will die, but they *don't* die. God doesn't kill the humans and he doesn't cripple them. In this story, the humans' choices, their inability to respect the boundaries set by God, make their lives difficult, but God does not take away their ingenuity, or their yearning for beauty and love. He does not give up on human beings. Cain kills Abel but God does not kill Cain.<sup>6</sup> The people of Noah's generation die in the Flood, but God resolves that that should not, will not, happen again. One of the clearest, brightest threads in the Old Testament is God's relationship—against all odds, covenant after covenant after covenant—with the human beings he has created. And the Bible assumes that human beings can make those covenants with God. In Deuteronomy 30, we read, "Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away . . . No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe." We are capable of good, and of doing better. We are not broken beyond mending.

But who will do the mending?

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<sup>6</sup> Brueggemann, Walter, *Genesis. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, 40–54.

On Palm Sunday, Father Jacobson spoke beautifully about time and urgency in the Gospel of Mark. “Immediately, immediately, immediately,” the evangelist hurtles us forth in fits and starts and halts. Jesus’ identity is hidden, then revealed, then hidden again. And then, finally, we arrive at Golgotha. Everything slows down, Father Matt says, and Mark asks us to stay for a while at the foot of the cross, to think and pray about what is revealed there.

Father Matt’s reading of Mark is helpful as we listen to Saint *John’s* account of Jesus’ Passion and Death. In John, as in Mark, the theme of opposition to Jesus is prominent. There is risk and danger in John, but the rhythm is different. It is not “ immediately, immediately, immediately.” Rather, as one New Testament scholar puts it, it is like the sound of waves on sand, repetitive and irresistible.<sup>7</sup> In the gospel’s first fourteen verses, we learn that Jesus is Word, Light, Son, full of grace, truth, and glory; and we learn why he has come: to make God known. And, soon enough, as early as chapter 3, we learn that God loves, gives, sends his Son, despite inevitable resistance. “For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.” As early as chapter 1, we learn that there is in Jesus a completeness, a fulness, that makes it possible for him to give us grace upon grace. To the Samaritan Woman he gives the water that leads to eternal life. To the blind man he gives sight and the promise of Light. He raises Lazarus from the dead and shows us where in the end we are meant to be.

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<sup>7</sup> Senior, Donald, C.P., *The Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of John. The Passion Series 4*, (Liturgical Press, 1991)

In the Gospel of John it is clear: it is Jesus who does the mending.

The Gospel of John is distinctive in this way: the evangelist and Jesus are not greatly interested in organization or structures, bishops, priests, or deacons, or even very much in apostles. There is not much discussion of law or ethics. There are no lists of virtues or vices. There is history and geography, empire and nation, power and resistance, to be sure, but we make a mistake if we think John's anachronistic language about "the Jews" is meant to point a finger or assign blame to the Other. For Jesus and for John, the real problem lies in the human heart, not in any one people. And, in this Gospel, Jesus aims to heal the human heart and to do it in two ways: by embodying the presence of God and through the power of love.

*Love.* The word itself has become a problem. We love so many things. We love restaurants and sports teams and singers and restaurants and chocolate. But in John's gospel love is stronger than that. In the Johannine community Love is the foundation of all things, because God is Love (1 John 4:8). Love flows from God. And God's love is more about doing than speaking or feeling. God sends a Son because he loves the world. The Son heals and feeds because he loves us. Jesus gives his friend Lazarus the gift of life because he loves him. He does not "lay down the law." He gives a commandment, and the commandment is this: "...love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). And he says, keeping his commandment is not about just following the rules, it's about love, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved

you; abide in my love” (John 15:9). This is the steady, persistent sound of the sea on the sand. It is love at the heart of things. And it is love that takes us inexorably to the Cross, where we stand and see Jesus being lifted up, already returning to the Father. We watch him unite mother and disciple. We may expect him to rail against his executioners, but he does not do it. In this gospel Jesus is Lamb of God, paschal lamb, but he is also King. He reigns from this tree. He has *chosen* to do this. Water and blood pour forth from his side, signs of God’s saving presence, symbols of God’s love. We stand at the foot of this Cross and we hear Jesus say, “It is finished—complete, accomplished, fulfilled” (John 19:30). Here, once again is the Son’s “fullness”. As he begins his return to the Father, he does not abandon us. He leaves his spirit among us. He is with us even as he returns to the Father, taking our broken, estranged humanity with him, taking *us* with him, crossing the boundary between death and life, reconciling us to God, revealing to us the miracle of reconciliation, showing us the way back home, teaching us what it means to be human, proving to us that *Love* never stopped loving us.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> I was lucky and blessed to be able to first study the Gospel of John at Union Theological Seminary in the 1980s when Lou Martyn and Ray Brown were on the faculty. So, they taught me a lot about John. Then I studied with Wayne Meeks at Yale, who had written about John and taught me about that gospel in ways different than Martyn and Brown. Somebody along the way introduced me to Moody Smith’s commentary on John, which I’ve always liked, because it’s succinct and rich at the same time. Just recently, I’ve been reading some of Father John Behr’s work on John and I’m liking his very theological approach, which I find beautiful and convincing, though it’s like learning a new language. Some of his work I find hard going. I have also started to read Amy Jill Levine’s work, which urges us Christians to grapple with John. She does so from the point of view of an observant Jew, who happens to love the New Testament, so I respect her a lot, though I can’t say I’ve figured out how to preach John and talk about these historical and interpretive problems at the same time, which I think she wishes I (and others) would figure out how to do. So, when I talk about John there are some things I’ve noticed in my own reading, but I wouldn’t be able to notice anything without having learned from all those folks. I’m not going to say I do any of them justice, but they were and are my teachers. I have to give them all credit.