

As a Pastor's kid I practically grew up in the church. So of course I went to Sunday school, was involved in youth group, and I attended pretty much every worship service that my dad led. Anyway, when I was growing I remember attending Holy Week services and every year when Good Friday came around I would wonder why they called it Good Friday.

Even though the name Black Friday is used for one of the biggest shopping Holidays of the year, I always thought it would be a better name than Good Friday. After all, as we look at the events that unfold tonight, at first glance they appear to be far from good. We see that one of Jesus' own disciples betrays him, another denies him three times, the rest of them run off and abandon him. As the story continues things go from bad to worse. A slave's right ear is chopped off, Jesus is struck in the face by a guard for no apparent reason, and the crowd and priests seek to have Jesus put to death by crucifixion, a punishment reserved for the lowliest of criminals. Many of us might expect the madness to stop when Jesus is put on trial before Pilate, but we know that this doesn't happen. All of the events that take place in our story this evening seem far from good and yet we call today Good Friday.

A lot of awful and terrible things happened during the arrest, the court proceedings, and the deliberation involving the sentencing of a supposed Criminal, and yet what makes this all Good is the fact that throughout our Passion narrative Jesus is in complete control of what happens as he follows his father's will. If he had wanted to save himself he could have called forth a legion of angels for protection, yet Jesus knew what was going to happen, and he still came forward and turned himself over to the guards.

During his life and ministry Jesus not only represents God's love and grace, but wherever he goes, good things seem to flow from his actions. He cured people of many

diseases, made the blind see, raised the dead, performed exorcisms, and taught his followers to love their enemies, and to avoid judging others. Wherever Jesus goes amazing, life changing events seem to take place, and he appears to always be in control even when he is put to the test by those who disagreed with his teachings.

In the Gospels he is confronted by the Religious leaders of his day on more than one occasion. Time and Time again they approach him in an arrogant manner with plans of backing Jesus into a corner. And time and time again they fail and leave feeling stumped and bewildered. During these confrontations, or conflicts, the Pharisees and Sadducees confront Jesus thinking that they are in complete control, thinking that they know God and God's laws better than anyone. We know this is not true, and that Jesus is the one who has control of the situation. At first glance it may appear in today's narrative that the religious authorities had finally succeeded in trapping Jesus, and had finally won the day, but we know that in the end... it is Jesus who is victorious in their final conflict.

Our first impression of the events that occur in our Gospel story from John is that things are out of control. While Jesus is the one captured, tried, tortured, and crucified, it is the rest of the humans in the story who fall apart. Jesus was obedient, he had power, and fully knew what lay before Him, yet he went to the garden of Gethsemane in obedience to his Father's will, and it is in the Garden where we witness his obedience most clearly as he prays for God to take the cup of suffering from him if there is another way.

When Judas the betrayer escorts the soldiers and temple guards into the garden to identify Jesus with a kiss, it is apparent that the guards are not in control. Most likely they had expected

Jesus to resist them or put up a struggle, but instead Jesus shocks the arresting officers by stepping forward and boldly presenting himself to them.

Notice that the soldiers draw back and fall to the ground when Jesus tells them, “I am he!” Their response is illogical. If they were seeking Jesus of Nazareth, and he confirms their quest with “I am he,” why do they fall to the ground? This is an unexpected reaction from armed soldiers who were trained for combat in the presence of an unarmed man. They seem to be struck by Jesus demeanor, for it was obvious that he was in command. The soldiers had expected a conflict, but instead were met with a calm and peaceful surrender.

The disciples in today’s narrative don’t show sign of much control either, for most of them run off and abandon Jesus after the guards arrest him. I’m sure if we were faced with a similar situation we too might choose to save ourselves and run. Imagine being unarmed, untrained for combat, and all of a sudden you are confronted by a mob of soldiers with swords and torches, some perhaps with the look of murder in their eyes. And yet, I am not naïve to the idea that there may be a few of us who would like to think that we would have taken up arms to try and defend Jesus, like Peter does in our story. But, he too was out of control, and clearly not thinking as he chooses to use violence against his enemies, rather than the love that Jesus had just taught them during their last meal together.

Many more people in today’s story seem to have little or no control as the events begin to unfold that lead Jesus to his trial and to his eventual crucifixion. The guards didn’t seem to have any power or self-control, one of them strikes Jesus without provocation. Then when Jesus is brought before the Roman governor we see that Pilate had no control either. He tries to get out of having to make any sort of decision by telling the crowd “take him yourselves and judge

him according to your law.” Yet, this is not good enough for the crowd because they do not have the power to put Jesus to death.

Pilate knew through his conversations with Jesus that Jesus was innocent, and at one point in our story he goes out and tells the crowd that he can find no case against him. Trying to gain back some control Pilate even offers the crowd a chance to release Jesus, but instead they choose to set free a guilty murderer by the name of Barabbas. Throughout his encounter with Jesus, Pilate is not in control and his behavior is opposite of the accused criminal standing before him on trial. Jesus is calm and collect, while Pilate shows that he is no poised diplomat. His actions show us that he is a ping pong ball being slapped back and forth between his public fears and his inner doubts. He pleads, he bullies, he begs, he hesitates, and finally he folds. In the end is evident that Jesus does not receive a fair trial and is handed over to be crucified.

For the religious authorities, Pilate’s final verdict is a victory which they had been seeking throughout Jesus’ ministry. They did not see Jesus for who he truly was, the son of God, but saw him as a blasphemous defiler of Jewish law. In their eyes he was a man who sought to follow his own set of rules. He healed people on the Sabbath; he claimed he had the power to forgive sins...The chief priests and Pharisees think that they are in control of what is about to happen, and believe that they have finally triumphed and proved themselves worthy to God. We, of course, know that this is not true. They were blind to who Jesus is, and the Messiah was now heading toward his final victory on the cross, a victory over those who had oppressed him, and a victory over sin and death.

As we look at the people in today’s story we recognize that there are times when we too have little to no control over our own lives! We may relate to the disciples in our narrative.

Some of us may feel like we betray Jesus when we sin, or when we choose to make other things more important in our lives. Maybe we feel like the soldiers in our story and follow orders blindly, and without question, even when we may believe that we should be fighting for what is right. Perhaps we are even like the roman governor in our story and we allow the crowds to force us into choosing their side, rather than having our own opinion or allowing justice to prevail.

For many of us, today could be called mourning Friday, as it is in German, because for us it is a day of sadness and a day of regret. Jesus' disciples most certainly mourned and wept at the loss of their teacher and friend. We too weep at the fact that Jesus had to go through such a painful and such a horrible experience that ended in his death. As we hear the passion narrative in John's Gospels, we begin to feel depressed and perhaps a bit guilty. We know in our hearts that in spite of what Jesus has done for us we are still living in sin, and at times it feels like we have no control over the sin in our lives.

The Good news is that God is in control, even during the times when we feel like we have little to no power in this world, and when it feels as if our lives are falling apart. This is most definitely reassuring because it can help us to understand that God has a plan for our lives, and that plan manifests itself in Jesus' sacrifice. In today's story we are given the perfect example of how God can take something that is bad, and turn it into something good. Human beings sin and fall short of the glory of God, yet God can take an awful thing, and make it all better, as he did by sending his son to us in order to bring about our salvation. God redeems the whole of creation in Christ's saving work on the cross, which will be complete when Jesus

returns for us. And because the crucifixion leads us to the resurrection and God's ultimate victory, today is in fact for us Good Friday.