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Good Friday Homily
St. Luke's Episcopal Church
March 21st, 2008

On Good Friday, Jesus, God's chosen servant, the one sent to bring life and salvation, submits to suffering and death. To our ears, this plan on God's part might sound bizarre. After all, most of *us* are on a crusade *against* death, both our own deaths and the deaths of others. Our philosophy is stave off death as long as possible. Do everything we can to decrease our chances of getting life-threatening illnesses. Eat right. Wear our seatbelts. Put on sunscreen. And beyond taking actions to keep ourselves alive and healthy, we try to fight against larger causes of death like poverty and hunger and AIDS. We want to avoid death at all costs, and when we cannot avoid it anymore, we won't go down without a fight. No, we will muster all our medical and technological power against it, "raging against the dying of the light" until our final breath. It is natural for humans to hate and abhor death, because it is our worst enemy. It robs us of that thing that is most precious to us, which is life.

But in the story of Jesus, we see that God has a very different philosophy about death than we do. While the rest of us are busy warding off death, on Good Friday we see Jesus, the Son of God, willingly undergoing a death of the worst kind – one that is senseless, gruesome, and shameful. As people with years of experience as humans under our belts, we might want to give God a little advice: "Listen, God, looks like you need a couple more trial runs at being human before you get it right, because last time you tried it, you ran smack into one of the worst deaths imaginable. Take a cue from us – it's about keeping death at bay, not inviting it. Got it? Oh, and by the way, if we

were you, we'd just steer clear of earth. We'd just stay put in heaven where you never run the risk of getting killed."

And yet Jesus does not adopt such an attitude towards death, which bewildered his disciples as much as it bewilders us. Jesus' disciples had seen him healing people of illnesses and even raising some people from the dead. They had seen Jesus preaching good and exciting news in the temple, giving those who felt abandoned by God in their illness or their poverty new reason to praise God again, and fresh hope that God was on their side. The disciples were dazzled by the unbelievable things that Jesus said and did every day he was with them. Surely, they thought, he must be the Messiah, the one chosen by God to save their people. But meanwhile Jesus kept dropping inconvenient comments about how he was going to suffer and die. The disciples reacted strongly against this: an early, painful death could never be in the cards for the Messiah, not for someone with such a high and noble destiny. But just like Jesus predicted, things take a turn for the worse one Passover, and the disciples watch helplessly and flee in terror as Jesus is arrested, condemned, and executed as a criminal along with a couple of thieves. As he hangs on the cross, he still refuses to use his power to get himself out of the face of death. He faces death with a resolve that we couldn't muster on the best of days. And after he had died, surely the disciples' questions abounded: Why ever would God let this happen? What good would Jesus be to them dead? How could he save them if he was lying in a tomb? Why ever would God the Father have chosen this path for Jesus? And why ever would Jesus consent to it, as he did the night before in the garden of Gethsemane, when he made up his mind to do his Father's will? Why did Jesus die?

So let's consider the alternative. What if the story about Jesus hadn't taken that downward turn into death? Maybe Jesus could have lived forever and established the kingdom of God here on earth by healing everyone who ever got sick. He could even have stuck with the ascension part of the plan but just skipped over the passion? He could have wished the world well, sent his disciples out to heal others in his name, and headed straight back to his Father in heaven and avoided the nastiness of pain and suffering and death. If it were us, that's probably what we would have chosen.

But again, in Jesus, we see that God doesn't think the way that we do. For God knows that Jesus would have been an incomplete Savior for us if Jesus had preached peace and love but failed to deal with our worst enemy. After all, despite our best work to keep death away, we have not yet succeeded in curing it. Death still has a perfect winning record, for every single time we've gone one-on-one against death, we have always lost. If Jesus came to earth, not on a fact-finding mission or a pleasure tour, but to be the Messiah who saved his people, then he needed to find a permanent solution to the problem of death.

And find one Jesus did, not by avoiding death as maybe we would, but by facing it head-on, so that as Isaiah puts it, through his bruises we could be healed. And so we begin to see that Jesus' death was not at all senseless, as it may at first have seemed. Rather, his death is the source of good news, the very best of news for us. For though Jesus as very God did not have to die, he knew that we did, that we would all, one way or another, face death, and he was not content to resign us to such a fate.

One of the ways that the church answers the question of "why did Jesus die?" is with a short, two-word phrase that shows up several times in our

Sunday liturgy. It's a little prepositional phrase that we might easily miss, yet I find to be one of the most beautiful and profound statements about God that we will ever hear or ever find on our own lips. Listen for it in these words that we hear every Sunday:

"For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven."

"For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate."

"Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us."

"On the night he died for us, our Lord Jesus Christ took bread."

This is the body of Christ, broken for you. This is the blood of Christ, shed for you.

In Latin, the phrase is *Deus pro nobis*; in English, we say, "God for us."

"God for us" means God who looks out for our well-being, even when we have turned away from God and gone astray like lost sheep.

"God for us" means God who answers prayers like the one we read in Psalm 22, "Be not far from me, for trouble is near, and there is none to help."

"God for us" means God who acts on our behalf, not because doing so is convenient for God, but because we need God to fight for us against the rule of sin and death, or else we will be left without aid.

These two little words – "for us" – are at the heart of the gospel, because they are at the very heart of God. God did not have to create the world or us; God did not have to make a covenant with us; God did not have to come and take on flesh and die to save us. God didn't have to, but God *chose* to, out of God's great love for us.

So here on Good Friday, we see Jesus acting as God "for us" in the most profound way possible. God doesn't just talk about how much God likes us, about how God wants to do us good, if it fits into the divine calendar. No, in Jesus, God willingly undergoes death "for us," so that we might be free from it forever, so that through his suffering we might be made whole.

On Good Friday, the story of Jesus takes an unexpected turn into death, as his body is laid in the tomb and the stone is rolled in front of it. Jesus has now undergone death "for us." But, thanks be to God, the story doesn't end there, and so we await the next twist in the story, the most unexpected turn of all.