

The Rev. Ryan Fischer
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Good Friday
April 2, 2021

Lectionary Year B: John 18:1-19:42

Over a century ago, a German philosopher named Friedrich Nietzsche proclaimed "God is dead." A rather provocative statement, isn't it? The one and only -- and (so we thought) immortal -- Creator of us and all living things is dead. Students of this philosopher will point out to you that "God is dead" because religions like Christianity have, throughout history, only served to enslave people and now, they want to toss out this old, dead God and replace him with a life-philosophy that affirms the power and worth of the human spirit. So, along with the "death" of God comes the liberation of humanity, so it was thought, as humanity was no longer bound by the rigid moral codes of an outmoded and passe Christian faith and its equally outmoded and passe God!

But for Christians -- who believe in the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit -- the concept of God's "death" is a reality of sorts. Today is the day in which Christians remember the crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ, who, according to the doctrine of the Trinity, is a coequal member of the Godhead, or, in layman's terms, the God who -- while still God -- came down from heaven and lived a real, earthly life as a real, earthly person. We can even go so far as to say that Jesus is not only the Son of God but also just as much "God" as God the Father. Therefore, if Jesus is "God," too, then we can say that God "died" on the cross on the first Good Friday. Another German -- in this case, a theo-

logian named Juergen Moltmann -- wrote a book entitled The Crucified God, reflecting, in a way, this belief within the Christian faith.

Without getting into the nitpicky doctrinal issues related to what happened on the cross, we are forced to acknowledge that our faith presents contradictions and conundrums that we'll probably never figure out. How is it that a philosopher can tell us "God is dead" and then we get all offended when, in fact, we come to church on Good Friday with a faith in the Trinity that says "Jesus is God, too" and then turn around and say "God cannot die"? Part of one's Christian calling is, indeed, to wrestle with these contradictions and conundrums -- rather than brushing them off altogether -- as having such acumen will be of great benefit especially when a nonbeliever rolls around and starts asking some mighty tough questions!

Perhaps more provocative than the modern idea of the death of God was the mere suggestion that Jesus of Nazareth was the "Son of God" in ancient times. You may remember from the other Passion accounts the taunts of the passersby -- "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross" and "He saved others; he cannot save himself" (e.g. Matthew 27:40b, 42a). Everyone, so it was thought, was confronted with the absurd idea that the Son of the Immortal God was -- gasp! -- mortal! But where Jesus really got hit hard was when he presented the religious authorities of the time with what amounted to be blasphemy. We read right from tonight's Passion account what that blasphemy was. The Jews said,

"We have a law, and according to that law [Jesus] ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God" (John 19:7).

How dare he!

And that's what maybe doesn't register with us all the time. Think about it this way: Friedrich Nietzsche would've probably created less of a ruckus two thousand years ago with his "God is dead" proclamation than Jesus created with his claim to be Son of God. Here, the question "How can God die?" would actually be less provocative than the question "How can a mortal man claim to be God's Son?"

Yet without, in this case, mortality, we wouldn't have much to stand on as Christians. The concept of someone like Jesus dying a real death for our sins is as central to our faith as the concept of a soldier dying for our freedom is to our being American citizens. But where many have died wearing the uniform of our Armed Forces, only one has died wearing a crown of thorns. Christ's sacrifice, therefore, is all the more awe-inspiring because he accomplished for the world more than any soldier ever could for a country.

And indeed, God does, in a way, "die" on Good Friday, as death is the only way for God to save us. In proving that the Son of God is, surely, mortal, God commits the ultimate act of humility by revealing himself in a cross and crown of thorns instead of a brassy, grandiose victory parade. Think about it -- what would mean more to you? A God who's a showoff or a God who's real? You

see, our God is real!

People often remark how one of America's richest men, Warren Buffett, prefers to drive an old pickup when, in fact, he could afford the finest, most costly automobiles in the world. Likewise, on Good Friday, it's striking to think that the all-powerful, highest, and most holy Being in the universe could reveal himself in ways that, for many, would actually be far more impressive. But what did he do instead? He chose humiliation, suffering, and death. As the Passion account puts it: "He bowed his head and gave up his spirit" (John 19:30b).

But did God really "die" on Good Friday? It depends on how you look at it. If Jesus as in the Son of God and God as in God the Father are one in the same, then yes, one could say that God died (in a way). Actually, I shall refrain from giving you a definitive answer because there are things which we, as Christians, simply need to ponder minus the satisfaction of a quick and easy answer.

What we affirm most of all on this day is the meaning of the cross on which Jesus died. Of all the possible ways in which God could've saved his people, he chose something that, to us, seems remarkably cruel and crude. God, however, seems to be plumbing our psyches for a sense of irony and paradox and...maybe he hopes we "get it." God hopes that we "get" these twisted ideas that victory can come through a cross and crown of thorns and that the Immortal can somehow become mortal. And, if you're at all confused by this, you might want to think of it not as the cross you

must bear, but rather as the cross you can embrace. "Getting it" in this case means embracing the irony, paradox, contradictions, and conundrums that your faith sets before you and saying, "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief" (Mark 9:24b, KJV).

Our Lord's suffering and death on this day is the ultimate revelation of the depth of God's love. Jesus once said, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). Well, as that statement applies to Good Friday, we remember the One who lay down his life for us, and see the sort of love he has. And if God should care enough about us to send his Son to do that, then our God is, indeed, good!

Victory over sin and death is his through an apparent anti-victory -- the cross. And yet the victory is both his and ours because in that one act of sacrifice, fate became destiny, damnation became salvation, and the curse of sin became forgiveness and life for all.

How could one ever say "God is dead" knowing that?

Amen.