

Good Friday Reflection, April 10, 2020, St. Andrew's, Des Moines © Steve Godfrey

I have been struck, if unsurprised, by the pictures of overflowing morgues in the news media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic, starting in Wuhan, then Milan, now New York. The news media are always looking to provoke, so it makes sense that they would highlight the grimmest aspect of the situation. It also helps to alert us to the scale of the danger we may face. These images also invite a response that is relatively unfamiliar to many of us living in the relative comfort of North America in the 21st century: lament. We postmodern American Christians, especially Episcopalians, are great at celebration, which we do with gusto, but we are not so comfortable with lament, praying our sadness, grief, disappointment, anger, and fear. We sing alleluias week after week throughout the year and reserve our lamentation for Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, and the short season in between.

Good Friday is our preeminent, regular opportunity for lamentation, when we read of the suffering servant in Isaiah and of Jesus's agonizing death, and we pray Psalm 22, one of the great lamentation prayers in the Bible and all of literature, with its evocative imagery of feeling like being surrounded by angry bulls, one's heart melting into wax, utterly isolated, forsaken by a God who feels very far away, with no one to help. We tend to look to fix things, but there comes a time of death and uncertainty when all that is left is to offer God these feelings of despair. So we pray Psalm 22 and anoint the body for burial, offering what we have left.

It's also helpful to note the imagery of lifting up and how Jesus's lifting up on a cross of death transforms the lamentation into hope for the world. Many will be saved through his experience of death. Indeed, one of the things that makes Psalm 22 such a great lamentation prayer is the last third of it, which moves beyond the lamentation into thanksgiving. A good lamentation process leads to thanksgiving. Good Christian mourning leads us from despair to hope, from the despair of the cross to the hope of the resurrection. Christian faith invites us beyond the loss and fear and grief and into the possibility of new life. That seems to be our vocation as we struggle with isolation, confusion and grief in this time of pandemic: How is Jesus calling us from that cross of death into the possibility of new life, beyond pandemic, beyond death? What are we called to offer now to help us and our communities lament the grief and move into new life?

I invite you in the hours ahead before our Easter celebration to prepare in silence to begin to live into your vocation as a Christian in this time to lead our people in lamentation and hope:

- How are you and your family lamenting this pandemic?
- What can we learn from the ministry of Joseph & Nicodemus?
- How are we to experience God's salvation through the suffering?
- How is Jesus's way of being lifted up instructive and inspiring?
- What do you hope?