



March 25, 2016

A Good Friday Sermon by Brent J. Eelman

By His Stripes, We Are Healed

We are here tonight because a gross miscarriage of justice occurred.

- A man was framed on trumped up charges,
- tried by a kangaroo court,
- and jeered by a crowd that didn't know the facts and were easily influenced.
- He was found guilty because it was politically expedient.
- He received the death penalty.
- He was taken to the gallows and hanged on a cross to die an excruciating death.

These are the events we commemorate in this service. There is no other religion that has as one of its primary holy days the trial and execution of its founder. And we call this day good.

Young people often ask me questions about some of the things that we believe. One of the questions that I can count on is, "Why did Jesus have to die?" It is a very profound question; one that is at the root of many a theological argument. But there is an equally important question that I am seldom asked: "Why do we human beings continually sacrifice innocent people?" This is the question we should ponder on this Good Friday.

The prophet Isaiah envisioned the redemption of Israel through the sacrifice of a "suffering servant". *He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By a perversion of justice, he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future?*

Let us not forget that the most enlightened government of the ancient world, Rome, committed this perversion of justice. They did it with the support of public opinion; the voices of the masses that shouting "crucify him!" What is it about humanity that demands sacrifice and the blood of the innocent?

The broadside troubadour, Phil Ochs, captured this human lust for sacrifice in his song, *The Crucifixion*.

*Then this overflow of life is crushed into a liar
The gentle soul is ripped apart and tossed into the fire.
First a smile of rejection at the nearness of the night
Truth becomes a tragedy limping from the light*

*All the heavens are horrified, they stagger from the sight
And the cross is trembling with desire.*

We still sacrifice the innocent. Four years ago, I was in Bethlehem. As I toured the ancient city where Jesus was born, I was distracted by some of the banners that were hanging from the street posts. On these banners were the pictures of young men or women. They were martyrdom banners. They were teenagers: many of them suicide bombers. Some cowardly adult willingly strapped a vest of explosives on these adolescents and sent them off to their death. It was apparent that the role of these young martyrs was greater than any political cause. They had become holy sacrifices, willingly offered by their elders, for the redemption of a people. We still sacrifice the innocent. We should not act morally superior, for we all do this. When a nation goes to war, it sacrifices its young upon the altar of its values.

After the horrible battle of Gettysburg, but a few hundred miles from here, Abraham Lincoln struggled with the challenge of articulating to the nation some higher purpose to the seemingly meaningless carnage that occurred on those hills. Influenced by the plays of Shakespeare and the King James Bible, he saw within their sacrifice a national rebirth: *We here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom....*

A new chapter in our nation's history began with those words. Lincoln probed deeper within the national spirit to discover a transcendent purpose for the sacrifice those men made: *this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom....*

The crucifixion of Jesus on one level is devoid of any meaning. An innocent man was wrongly convicted and put to death by the justice system. But we cannot remain on that level. We must probe deeper within the human spirit. The words of the Isaiah, though written almost 700 years before the crucifixion, provide us with an interpretive framework: *Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his stripes we are healed.*

Interpreters through the centuries have identified Isaiah's suffering servant as either Israel, Moses, or perhaps another prophet. *The Suffering Servant* was the proverbial scapegoat. The scapegoat was an unblemished animal, usually a goat, which was sent out into the wilderness to perish, carrying with it the sins of the community. The suffering servant, blameless, bore the blame for humanity's sin and evil.

The early church identified Christ with Isaiah's *Suffering Servant*. The servant hymn or poem in Chapter 53 became the framework for understanding Jesus' crucifixion. The death upon the cross was an atonement for the sins of the world: *by his stripes we are healed*. This is the irony of this day. The brutality and injustice of humanity became the vehicle for the salvation of the humanity. God has taken that which is most evil about humanity, our willingness to sacrifice the innocent, and made it the foundation, indeed the cornerstone, of our salvation. *By his stripes we are healed*.

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