

Many of us gathered here tonight have spent time sitting at the bedside of a relative or friend who is dying. We who have experienced this kind of deathwatch are people “of sorrows, acquainted with grief.” And, quite frankly, this experience will inevitably be part of every human being’s life because none of us can escape death, whether it is the death of a dearly loved relative, a friend, or even our own death. Being present in a deathwatch is a necessary work and ritual as we walk with loved ones to the endpoint of life.

Tonight, on this day we call **Good** Friday, we gather together and stand at the foot of the cross to experience a deathwatch. We stand together in community as we watch our friend, Jesus, draw his last breath and we experience a form of liturgy. The word liturgy means “the work of the people.” So, as we come together tonight, we come to experience a **necessary** form of the work of the people, a liturgical deathwatch.

This has been a week of unspeakable suffering as the world has again watched ghastly acts of terror and violence perpetrated upon the lives of innocent people, and we wonder where is God in the midst of such horror. **Holy Week** itself is a week when we remember the unspeakable suffering and violence Jesus faced during his last week of life, and no

doubt the people who stood at the foot of the cross 2,000 years ago wondered where is God in the midst of such suffering. Tonight, **we** stand at the foot of the cross, and **we** wait and **we** wonder.

As we have traveled with Jesus through this week of passion to the place of the cross, we have experienced the juxtaposition of power and weakness, cruelty and tenderness, suffering and astonishing forgiveness. As we come to the culmination of Jesus' short thirty-three years of life, we watch as he is nailed to the cross, the electric chair of that day. We come and gather around that cross to see this one who is the embodiment of immeasurable grace and love even in the depth of all the dehumanizing violence, tyranny, suffering and death. And we wonder.

Friends and family have gathered for this deathwatch, looking on as our friend, Jesus, is executed. Gathered here under the cross we find a menagerie of humanity and I wonder what role I play. I see the executioners, the guards and the gamblers, the mourners, the friends, the followers, the mother, the criminals, the devout religious elite, the politicians, the passerby and the innocent bystander. And, all I can do is wonder how this dear friend, this Jesus, can continue to love this lot of human beings even as he breathes his last breath. Yes, this is a liturgical deathwatch.

Frederick Buechner, in his book *Waiting in the Dark*, writes, “At no time more than at a painful time do we live out of the depths of who we are instead of out of the shallows.” As we gather and watch Jesus breathe his last, I wonder and I think about this. I think about the fact that I need to go to a deeper place to make sense of this horror. I am reminded of the necessary, disturbing, yet cathartic aspect of this experience. I am reminded of the way in which we replay the details of this story year after year. I am reminded of the way in which we find ourselves in the story and consider our own culpability. Yes, this liturgical deathwatch is a necessary work of the people, even if repulsive. Theologian, William Cavanaugh, has written, this is “a kind of perverse liturgy in which the body of the victim is the ritual site where the state’s power is manifested in its most awesome form.” This example of the state’s power manifested in its most awesome form is a perverted, violent, diseased form of liturgy. It is a diseased form of the work of the people. As we experience this liturgical deathwatch, waiting and watching as Jesus faces the brutal, violent end of life, we come face to face with love. A perverted, diseased liturgy comes face to face with true liturgy as we begin to see the very heart of God. In this execution of our friend, Jesus, we see a God who is present in the deepest, darkest, most violent places in life. What juxtaposition we find as we live and

experience this true liturgy. Every time we replay this deathwatch we experience a true liturgy which is the Eucharist. We enter into the place where the body of the victim, our friend, Jesus, makes possible the creation of a **new** body. For, it is in the death of Jesus' body, a new body is formed – the community of believers – a **new** body which lives by resurrection hope.

Yes, this is a **necessary** liturgical deathwatch. We **need** to replay this liturgical deathwatch every year. We **need** to experience this liturgy because we need to be reminded of the diseased, counter liturgies that are taking place in the world and in our culture. Debra Dean Murphy, associate professor of religious studies at West Virginia Wesleyan College, suggests “there are other liturgies we live by in which bodies are scripted into other dramas – like the dramas of fear and exclusion. We have seen some of these liturgies lived out this week. Furthermore, this has been painfully evident in our presidential politics, in civic liturgies of campaign rallies and debates.” Catholic theologian and priest, James Alison, calls these liturgies, these forms of worship in a violent world, chilling as he describes their similarity to a Nuremberg rally during the reign of the Third Reich. He writes:

You bring people together and you unite them in worship. You provide regular, rhythmic music ... You give them songs to sing. You

build them up with a reason for their togetherness, a reason based on a common racial heritage ... You keep them waiting and the pressure building up ... After the build-up, the Führer appears ... they are united in fascination with this extraordinary person, to whom they have handed over the task of being the chief liturgist. And he does not disappoint ... the crowd is delirious, outside themselves, united in love and adoration...

Such are the liturgies that unite people in today's violent world, liturgies we have seen enacted in the terrorist attack this week. Such are the liturgies embodied in reactive behaviors that **lead** to exclusion and fear. Such are the liturgies that lead to forms of exclusion and create a mentality of us and them, something Brian McLaren articulates as *evil coming in twos*. McLaren, a theologian I consider a modern day prophet, suggests:

Terrorism is evil, and any group that is involved in terrorism is not a true expression of religion but a sick, deformed, and dangerous cult. It is **also** evil to **react** to terrorism with hate and injustice and calls for mass surveillance and mass exclusion of [any whom we consider "other"]. At first glance, these calls might seem "strong" or "tough," but really, such reaction is foolish and dangerous. It is important for people of faith and good will to **not** remain silent. Evils often come in two's.

Yes, such evil and such diseased forms of liturgy, a perverted work of the people, often come in two's as evil actions produce **evil reactions** in us.

Tonight we move toward the end. Jesus' last words were, "It is finished." Tonight we move toward the conclusion and purpose of this Lenten journey. And, as we watch Jesus die, the liturgy we enact is one of

hope, **not** fear. The liturgy we enact is one of embrace, **not** exclusion. As we live this liturgical deathwatch, we know that in Jesus, we find hope. We know he has promised that, after three days, he will rise again! And, in Jesus, our dear friend who hangs there dead and lifeless, we see a world that is over-turning and we find the reorientation of our entire existence. Our liturgical deathwatch is coming to an end as we watch humanity kill its Creator. **But**, we remember that “in God accepting this end in Jesus, there is now **nowhere** that we go that God has not been before, not even death. [Not even the dreadful violence we have seen throughout this week.] And, this descent into death in itself is **not** the last word because Sunday is coming.” (Frederick Buechner)