

**Good Friday, Year A, 4/7/23**

**Pastor Ellen Schoepf**

Many of us gathered here tonight have spent time sitting at the bedside of a relative or friend who is dying. Ken and I intimately shared this experience with Dorothy this past October as she faced the end of her life. Such an experience is sacred, and it is a deathwatch. 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 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* literally 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. And we wonder, "Where is God in the midst of such horror?" **Throughout this week** we have been remembering the unspeakable suffering and violence Jesus faced during his last week of life. And I have no doubt that the people who stood at the foot of the cross some 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.

Friends and family have gathered for this deathwatch, looking on as 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 passersby, the innocent bystanders. And all I can do is wonder how 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 we 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 **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." It is a perverted, violent, **diseased** form of liturgy. It is a **diseased** form of the work of the people. Yet, as we experience this work of the people, 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**, a God who embraces even the deepest brokenness of this world in love and continues to love.

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 again experience this true liturgy. Every time we replay this deathwatch, we experience a true liturgy which is the Eucharist. We enter 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 that 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 work of the people every year. As Jesus hangs on a cross before us, he holds up a mirror to all our diseased, distorted liturgies. 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, the other liturgies we live by in which bodies are scripted into other dramas – like the dramas of fear, hatred, and exclusion. Such are the liturgies that unite people in today’s violent world, liturgies we continually see enacted in the epidemic gun violence that plagues our culture. In the routine child sacrifices we make to the god of guns. This is truly a diseased, sick ritual or liturgy we allow to happen over and over again. Such are the liturgies embodied in reactive behaviors that **lead** to exclusion and fear, liturgies we see as policies created to ban books and marginalize the LGBTQIA community, liturgies that criminalize compassion and care for transgender youth. Such are the liturgies that lead to forms of division and hatred, liturgies that attempt to whitewash the history of slavery in this country and walk back the civil rights movement, liturgies that create a mentality of us vs them. These are the deeply distorted, diseased forms of liturgy, the truly perverted works of the people we experience on a daily basis. And, in the cross of Jesus we find that God still lovingly embraces us, takes our sordid, perverted, deadly liturgies into God’s very self, enters the tombs we create, breaks the chains of death that hold us, and then transforms our very lives through grace and love.

Tonight, as we face the cross, we move toward the end. As we stand at the foot of the cross, we hear Jesus' last words as he proclaims, "It is finished." Tonight, we move toward the conclusion and purpose of this Lenten journey. And, as we watch Jesus die, we astonishingly watch him embrace this deeply broken world with **love**, and then **we** are called to **remember that the liturgy we enact as people of faith is one of hope, not fear**. The work of the people **we are called to** enact and live is one of **embrace**, not **exclusion**. As we live this liturgical deathwatch, we know that in Jesus, we find **hope, a vibrant living hope, we find grace, and we find love**. We also 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 truly **over-turning**, and there, in that place, 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. And this descent into death in itself is **not** the last word because Sunday, yes Sunday, is just around the corner." (Frederick Buechner)