

Good Friday 2021: What Makes This Night Different?

Screen: [moving pic of empty tomb -- on screen throughout homily]

Last Saturday, March 27th, the day before Palm Sunday, Jewish people began their observance of Passover. We will actually hear the story of their escape from Egypt, the event that inspired the Passover observance, tomorrow night at the Easter Vigil as part of a series of Old Testament stories which walk us through salvation history. I hope you will join us. During the Seder meal, which is a part of the Passover ritual, the youngest child present asks all of those gathered, ***“What is it about this night that is different from all other nights?”*** The answer given by the elders recounts the Jews liberation from slavery in Egypt. The purpose of the Seder is to teach Jewish children to ***“remember,”*** so that they will never forget, the horrors of being enslaved in Egypt, and the goodness of God who delivered them from captivity. Although I certainly wouldn't describe the past year as comparable to the slavery the Jewish people experienced in Egypt, we all probably do understand just a little bit better what

the Israelites experienced in Egypt when they lost so many of their freedoms for a very long time.

In an article titled, *“Preaching Holy Week in the Middle of Pandemic -- Again,”* William Williman, of Duke Divinity school, observed: *“What a violent week we call holy! Gritty, realistic stories of betrayal, arrest, perjury, torture, mobs, death, and burial. ...Some years we preachers must labor to make connections between the gospel and our lives. This Holy Week, the world does all that for us.”*

Over the past year during the pandemic I have been praying and reflecting on where God has been present in the midst of all of the suffering and death, and listening to hear God’s voice. And, in response to my prayers, one of the things I keep hearing over and over again in my head is that question: ***“What is it about this night that is different from all other nights?”*** It recurs so often that it has begun to regularly occupy my thoughts and prayers. It’s as if God is asking me -- asking us -- to answer the question: ***What is different about this past year from any other***

year? How am I different -- how will I be different -- after the pandemic? I feel like God is asking me to take time to remember who I have been, who I was before the pandemic, so that I can be sure that I become a better person, a better Christian after.

Tonight, on this Good Friday 2021, I believe that God invites us to enter into the darkness of the tomb with Christ.

We just listened to John's version of the Passion which recounted Jesus' arrest, torture, crucifixion and death. At the end of the story, Jesus' body lies in the tomb; in darkness.

Because we are an Easter people, we know that the story does not end tonight...in the darkness of the tomb. We know that the story continues with Jesus' resurrection, which we will celebrate for the first time tomorrow night, and again on Easter Sunday. But, the glorified resurrected Jesus who will emerge from the tomb will not be the same Jesus that entered the tomb on that first Good Friday. And, I believe that we are likewise called to emerge from the darkness of the pandemic, from the societal turmoil and violence of the last year, as an Easter people. I

believe that this Good Friday we are called to reflect deeply on this question: ***What is different about this Good Friday than any other Good Friday that we have or will experience in our lives?*** Before we return to “normal,” we are called to “Stop!”; to pause, to reflect on who we have been and who we will be in the future. To reflect on whether there is even a “normal” to return to after what we have experienced over this year. Or, are we called to create and live a new “normal.”

As followers of Christ, as we exit out of the darkness of the tomb and into the light, we need to decide whether we are OK returning to a “normal” that includes systemic racism, that includes the use of hurtful symbols and practices...just because that is the way it has always been. In January, we witnessed a mob attack our capitol wielding some of these very symbols of racism and hate. As followers of Christ, are we OK with returning to a “normal” that includes these kinds of actions? Or, do we emerge like Christ from this Good Friday into the glory of Easter as changed, transformed people of Christ who help to create a

new “normal” which recognizes the equality and dignity of all people?

As I was preparing this homily, I came across a homily I gave on Palm Sunday 2018, so I decided to take a look to see what I said three years ago at the beginning of Holy Week. What I found really surprised me.

On February 14th, 2018 -- Ash Wednesday and Valentines Day -- Nikolas Cruz walked into Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida with an automatic rifle and killed 17 people. Following the horrific event, as you may recall, on March 24, 2018, young people from across the nation came to Washington, DC to participate in the “March for our Lives.” My daughter Catherine attended the march with several of her friends. At the end of the march, young people gave impassioned speeches asking for their representatives in Congress to pass sensible gun violence prevention laws. And, they wore T-shirts which read, “Never Again.” But, the violence has happened again, ...and again, ...and again. And, now as we come to the end of Holy

Week 2021, three years later, we have just experienced two more mass shootings -- this time 18 people dead. Is this the “normal” we want to return to? Once again people are asking for Congress to pass sensible gun legislation. But, will they do so, *or will they simply look away from the horror yet again?* As Christians, do we follow Jesus out of the dark tomb back into the “normal” which allowed and supported gun violence, or do we help to define a new “normal.”

These are just a few of the things I believe we should as a community reflect on as we enter the tomb with Christ on this darkest of nights. I invite you to also spend some time -- tonight or tomorrow, as we mark the hours when Christ laid in the tomb -- to really think about how God is calling you to change as a result of your personal experience of the pandemic, this year of racial intolerance and hatred, this year of political division...this Holy Week. Give God the time and space to speak to you, and then be ready for something new. For you, ***What is it about this night --***

this Holy Week, this Good Friday -- that is different from all other nights?