

Sermon for Good Friday
April 7, 2023
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Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church
Los Alamos, New Mexico

Isaiah 52:13-53:12
Psalm 22
Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9
John 18:1-19:42

Pretend you do not know what comes next.
Pretend you only know your teacher has been slain.
And not just killed, but humiliated, scourged and crucified.
Nails were driven through his hands and feet.
A sword was thrust into his side.
Look upon his tortured and torn body.
Share in the agony so painful we must look away.
And remember, we and our friends ran away and denied him.

And now can we dare pray to God: Be present with us LORD.

This day is a day of Agony.
After a week in which we have heard to stories of a man
hailed as a king,
feted by his disciples at a meal,
arrested and tried on false charges,
and then executed in Agony.

In Ancient Greece, a public gathering was called *agon*.
Because the Greeks placed a high value on sports,
there were almost always athletic events on festival days.
The struggle to win the prize in such contests came to be called *agonia*.
This term came also to be used for any difficult physical struggle
and then for the pain that went with it—physical or mental.
Our English word *agony*, meaning “intense pain of mind or body,”
thus comes from a word that meant a happy celebration.¹
A happy celebration?
We call it Good Friday, but only because we know how the story ends.
Or should I say, how the story begins.

Our story, the story of Christians, began then in death and despair.
And we live on that edge between fear and hope.

Needless to say, this balancing act – living by faith,
is prone to produce anxiety.

Now it may be obvious, but Anxiety is a feeling of fear, dread, and uneasiness.

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/agony>

It might cause you to sweat, feel restless and tense, and have a rapid heartbeat.
It can be a normal reaction to stress.²

Anxiety is a normal emotion.
It's your brain's way of reacting to stress and alerting you of potential danger ahead.
Everyone feels anxious now and then.
Occasional anxiety is OK.³

I never thought of anxiety as a good thing.
I have lived with anxiety most of my life.
Sometime around the age of seven, I started biting my finger nails.
Though my parents tried therapy and counseling,
nothing has ever been able to change that pattern of behavior.
When I am anxious, I bite my nails.

It wasn't until I talked with a counselor at a clergy wellness conference
that I found a new way seeing my anxiety.

"Raymond," she told me, "you have lived with anxiety most of your life.
It seems to feed your creativity and gives you energy to achieve.
Perhaps, you need to make friends with your anxiety?"

It was an insight.

However, I'd learned on my own that when anxiety overwhelmed me,
I needed to be proactive because that anxiety of mine was rooted in emotion. When anxiety overwhelmed me,
I'd get caught in my right brain.
I discovered by doing the multiplication tables,
I could draw myself back into the logical left brain.
Then I learned to make lists of what I might be anxious about
and to tick off whether there was anything I really needed to be anxious about. Usually it was just a sense of
being overwhelmed
that needed to be put into perspective.

It was a matter of being grounded.
I've found it's a matter of using my five senses to ground me in reality.
Some ideas include: breathing deeply, tasting food, walking,
touching or even just holding a piece of ice.⁴
It's tactile and a way of being in the here and now.

A parishioner, John Lehner, reminded me of this reality
on Wednesday at the Healing Eucharist.
At the end he gave each of us present an iron nail piercing a piece of cardboard
on which was written: "I am this strong."

An iron nail.

² <https://medlineplus.gov/anxiety.html>

³ <https://www.webmd.com/anxiety-panic/guide/anxiety-disorders>

⁴ <https://www.healthline.com/health/grounding-techniques>

Like the nails that pierced the flesh of Jesus on this Good Friday 2,000 years ago.
Iron nails driven through the flesh and into the hard wood of the cross.

Tradition tells us that iron is the enemy of Satan.
Having served as Canon to a Bishop of Sicilian origin,
I learned that iron is carried in the pocket
to ward off the evil eye and the power of the devil.
Iron grounds the power of evil.

And on that Good Friday 2,000 years ago,
the flesh of Jesus the Christ was joined to the iron in the Cross
to ground the evil that had enslaved the world in sin.

The agonized cries of Jesus on the Cross
was joined with the screams from the depths of hell
as the Christ of God grounded universal evil.

He died, once for all. As it says in the reading from Hebrews

Since, then, we have a great high priest
who has passed through the heavens,
Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession.
For we do not have a high priest
who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses,
but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are,
yet without sin.
Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness,
so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications,
with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard
because of his reverent submission.
Although he was a Son,
he learned obedience through what he suffered;
and having been made perfect,
he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

Amen.