Sermon for Good Friday
April 18, 2025

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene
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Isaiah 52:13-53:12 Psalm 22 Hebrews 10:16-25 John 18:1-19:42

I am tired of death.

I am sick and tired of human cruelty.

I am absolutely tired of perversions of justice.

And so, dear fellow followers of Christ, I find it hard – maybe harder each year – to preach on Good Friday.

But we return each year – and we return each week – to the death and resurrection of Jesus. And every year in Holy Week, we dive deeply into this journey of Christ Jesus. In this journey, we see vividly the self-deception, the cruelty, and shame, the hypocrisy, the fear and desire for control, of humanity. We see humanity's refusal of the good, and of the God of Life.

So, friends, I will preach. Because this day has the power of revealing. On this day, we see ourselves, and we see God.

There was something that struck me in a new way this year as I read this part of John's Gospel that we just heard. I want to invite you to think about this with me. There is a contrast – a huge contrast – between two very short sentences we heard. I want to invite you to think about the difference, the huge divide, between these two short statements: "I am he," and "I am not."

"I am he," spoken by Jesus. And "I am not," said repeatedly by Peter.

Jesus looks right into the face of oncoming danger, and confronts it. The detachment of guards and police that came out of the shadows for him with torches and weapons, Jesus faces head-on with calm authority. He asks them directly, "Whom are you looking for?" When they said, "Jesus of Nazareth," Jesus said these words: "I am he." And he repeated them.

Peter tried to act bravely in the moment, ready to fight to defend Jesus.

Peter seemed to lose his nerve. Even though he followed at a distance, he also tried to create a bit of distance. The disciple who was allowed past the gate got Peter in, but the woman guarding the gate asked Peter, "You aren't another one of this man's disciples, are you?" And Peter then said these words: "I am not." And he repeated them.

Meditate with me on the meaning of these two short sentences. “I am he.” And “I am not.”

Jesus, as we know him from the Gospel of John, has repeatedly made “I am” statements. “I am the bread of life.” “I am the light of the world.” “I am the door.” “I am the good shepherd.” “I am the resurrection and the life.” “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” “I am the true vine.” Jesus has constantly said who he is. He has spoken about himself by what is his nature, his purpose, his reason for being. Each time Jesus has said an “I am” statement, these statements have been affirmations. And now, Jesus speaks to the guards and police what sums it all up: “I am he.”

Jesus lives his full nature without reservation. Not in an in-your-face manner, but with a definite, deep rootedness and power of being. Being!

I hope you hear in Jesus’ words the words of God to Moses from the burning bush: “I am.” I AM. My name is Being itself.

These are Jesus’ words to those who would sneak in to snatch him by force out of civic and public life, out of spaces of influence in religious life. I AM. No wonder they fell back, at the words spoken so clearly. Words that rang out with bright vividness, like Jesus transfigured in shining brilliance on the mountain. The truth was so strong, the rootedness so deep, the clarity so crisp, they all fell back in an impulse of awe.

Compare this statement, “I am,” to “I am not.” “I am not” obliterates. It crosses out, smudges out, erases. It denies being.

How many are the ways we say to ourselves and to others – and to God – “I am not”! We say it about ourselves: “I am not good, I am not good enough.” “I am not mean or unkind.” “I am not strong,” “I am not a weakling.” We push away things that may indeed be true about ourselves, in some small or large measure, because to admit such things about ourselves would mean recognizing that we are perhaps more than we play ourselves to be. We way it about our relationships in the world: “I am not with her.” “I am not a part of that group.” “I am not your friend.” We push people away and protect ourselves from association with people who we think will give us a bad name. We say these words about responsibility for our actions: “I am not the one who did this.” “I am not the primary actor.” “I am not in charge.” Like Adam, and like Eve, we push away responsibility from ourselves onto others.

But deeper than any of this is how “I am not” becomes a denial of Being itself. Peter, here, denies the most incredible part of his life that he has lived, as a close follower and friend of Jesus. This cuts into, slices away at, a vivid and deeply rooted part of his being. It cuts him off from Jesus the Vine with whom he has been entwined. He becomes less. And it will take the hard conversation with Jesus after the resurrection to heal and mend what was severed – to make Peter whole again and to put him back in touch with his deepest sense of being.

“I am he,” “I am she” – and “I AM” – these are statements of raw, unadulterated being. To speak this way shows courage, and willing vulnerability. Unshielded, with no attempts to cover or to adorn oneself with anything. Simply, to stand. Arms open. Rooted in the ground of creation. Knowing and owning who you are. Undefended. Letting one’s being flow out toward others, around others, and into others.

This is, maybe what is at the heart of the self-emptying way of Christ Jesus. There is a strength that is rooted in the very core of Being itself that allows for Emmanuel, God-with-us, to give himself away and empty himself so completely. Like that, friends, in smaller but powerful ways, there is strength we find when were are rooted in the very core of Being – when we are rooted in Jesus the Vine, when we are opened to the wondrous person that each of us is as the image of God, when we allow the flow of the life-giving Holy Spirit to carry us. It is then that we find there is continuing ability to give of ourselves, to allow ourselves to empty for others around us.

This self-emptying is willful and intentional. It is not fighting, fleeing, freezing, or fawning in the face of the chaos and cruelty that we humans can bring and do bring into the world. It is a purposeful other path.

Jesus is strong throughout the movement of his betrayal, arrest, mock-trial, condemnation, torture, further trial, more torture, crucifixion, and death. But let's be clear: this is not the same kind of strength we often think of and fantasize about. Jesus is not some svelt warrior-god hero. Remember what we heard of the suffering servant in the words of the prophet Isaiah – that this One has no form or majesty that is awe-inspiring. No, Jesus is plain at best, and doesn't stand out for any overpowering strength. Because Jesus' strength is never about overpowering.

Jesus is strong in a way of resoluteness intimately intertwined and fused with care. "I am resolute in my care and love for these creatures." Even in the face of being despised. Even when becoming a focus of disgust and scorn. Even when looked at and treated like a despicable, an untouchable.

And part of becoming an untouchable is becoming all the things we deny about ourselves – our mortality, our weakness, and our sinfulness. Becoming all these things, taking on all of these things, not refusing them. He bore our sins and iniquities. He bore our weakness and brokenness. He did not refuse them, he did not say "I am not."

Oh, God, open our hearts to follow this Jesus. Whatever the moment, whatever the challenge, whatever the cross, help us be rooted so deeply in you that we have the courageous open-heartedness to stand and say, "I am he," "I am she." And let this same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus, who did not grasp at equality with you his Father, but emptied himself, becoming human and a servant, and faced willingly into the path of death, even death at our hands. In this, and through all this, is the very heart of Being itself, the way of God, the simple statement, "I AM."