

Through (Based primarily on John 19: 28-42)

Why are you here?

Why did you come tonight?

Did you come to be with your church?

Was it a deeply held conviction of faith; a love of God? Or, maybe, you're not sure why you came. Maybe it was just a vague feeling that, somehow, you belonged here.

Whatever your reasons, you came. You decided to be with us on the darkest night of our faith, the night when we live out the pain and the tragedy of the death of Jesus.

You came, because you knew that this is something that you must endure, not deny.

Something that is dark, even if it holds the promise of light.

Something that you need, even if it you don't want it.

Something that you have to go through; not around.

And what we cannot get around tonight, what we must go through, is the contradiction, the paradox, the mystery, of a moment that defines God's glory, in the middle of complete humiliation and defeat. John's gospel calls the crucifixion of Christ God's glory, but it is a glory beyond our sense of a bright and shining and triumphant presence. In the time of Jesus, "glory" meant the full weight and magnificence of an esteemed reputation.

So there is a heaviness to this night, because we must bear the full weight of what happened on the cross, the full size, and depth, and breadth, and shape, and sheer mass of what one man dying unjustly as a tortured criminal has meant for the reputation of God for all time.

For on God's reputation tonight hangs our reputation.

It is not enough tonight for us to understand God's reputation, or our reputation, through God's gift of creation. The flesh on our bones, the plants that bloom in springtime sunlight, the infinite heavens in the nighttime sky - these are miracles, and glorious in their own way, we know. But they are not enough for us to find God's complete and most holy glory tonight, and certainly not our own glory in the midst of our sins. No, there is more.

It is not enough tonight for us to understand God's reputation, or our reputation, through the glory of the Holy Spirit. God's Holy Spirit breathes eternal life into all things, unites all things, and transforms all things, and makes us who we are as children of God in Christ. But by itself, the Holy Spirit is just a flickering flame, a passion, a hope. That is not what brings us here tonight. No; there is more.

No, there is more. God's reputation, and our reputation, hangs on the glory found in the sturdy planks and the piercing nails of a cross thrust hastily into the sky, blood dripping down its side, and on the beaten, tortured flesh of a man, who, in John's gospel, can only utter the words, "I thirst," and, "It is finished," before breathing his last. God's reputation, and our reputation, hangs in shocking silence as that last breath moves out into the darkening afternoon of a desolate and despised place.

God's reputation, and our reputation, hangs on an empty and forgotten cross, and on what happens to the body taken down from that cross, lovingly anointed and wrapped, and laid in a tomb by a trusted friend. God's reputation, and our reputation, hangs on a decision not to turn back from the cross in shame, not to go around the cross in denial, but to go through the cross, to find meaning, love, and hope, in the one word that seems to take

them all away: death.

The reality of death is simple. I have seen it, as many have. No matter what happens before it, the moment of death is...silence. We can offer up the comfort of a hospice, or a familiar bed at home, pleasant music, heartfelt prayers, but the moment will always be the same. Silence. An ending. And then, whatever happens next.

And yet, death is not just a moment, not just an event at the end of a life. Death is God's offer for us to stake our reputation on God's reputation, forged in love on a cross. It is a reputation more valued than the purest gold, gold that is heavy beyond measure, gold that must become as shining as a ray from the sun striking warm soil, to raise up the possibilities of new life inside the lifeless shell of a seed.

Death is the seed into which we must place all the meaning, and the weight, and the glory of everything for all time, so that our story can become God's story through God's love.

God's reputation, and our reputation, hangs not on a period, or a comma, at the end of a story called life, but on the story written through this punctuation, on how God's story on earth was lived up to, through, and beyond that one silent moment in time, and on how we allow the weight and the value of that moment to be felt not just in one moment, but throughout all moments, allowing this one seed planted as Jesus, the Christ, to grow into the story of all life for all time for all of God's kingdom.

John's gospel shows us clearly how God writes this story. God writes the story of the cross in massive and ponderous quietness, with a few spare words, feeling the thirstiness of the flesh of Jesus, even as God lets us know that God thirsts in Jesus beyond

measure for the eternal glory of Easter sunlight.

God marks the end of God's time on earth as Jesus with three simple words, words that mark the completion of all that Jesus could do to demonstrate God's love for all of creation, forever: "It is finished." God, in this moment, reveals, in its events, their eternal connection to Israel's most heartfelt prophecies - Jesus' wound spouts the water and blood of promised salvation; Jesus' unbroken knees cement God's reputation in Jesus, the promised Messiah for everyone.

God knows how to write a good story on the cross, a story that is good news for all time.

How will we hang our reputation on Jesus tonight? How will we write our story up to, through, and beyond the cross? How will we, like the women who wept at Jesus' feet, who cradled his lifeless form in their arms, who waited patiently to care for his body in the tomb, accept the folding of our old lives into a preparation for new life, weeping, and wailing, and then loving our way through faith to the sprouting of something wonderful beyond our imagining?

We have a job to do tonight to secure our reputation in God, just as Jesus had a job on that Friday two thousand years ago. Our job is to do what Jesus did - to embrace the cross completely, as both our end, and our beginning; our job is to abandon all stories about the cross that would deny its fearless power, and to embrace the one story of love that gives the cross the full weight of its saving glory; our job is to surrender all of our ideas about what the cross is, and to allow the cross to be not just an idea, or a symbol, or a piece of empty wood, or a man in agony on it, but to allow the cross to be the naked truth of

everything that we fear about life and death, and everything that can liberate us from that fear, through faith in God's shining reputation that hung on the cross in everlasting love.

Our job tonight is to abandon all hope of having any reputation of any kind, apart from the maker of heaven and earth, whose reputation can save us only through the cross.

Religion does not make this job easy for us. Some traditions offer us the cross only in the form of the crucified Jesus, ending the story of his life in the punctuation of human pain. Other traditions offer us the cross only in the form of bare and empty wood, a comma at the start of a story that forgets the full weight of God's reputation that hung on it.

Neither of these images of the cross alone can complete the story of how to go through the cross with Jesus, how to endure what seems to be an inevitable ending period, with faith in a comma that must embrace and transform everything that makes us human through God's love, a comma that Jesus was writing even as the nails struck his flesh, but that did not, and could not, stop the truth and the pain of that terminal punctuation.

Do not let either image of the cross stop you from embracing the cross as the source of your salvation. Do not let its pain or its emptiness draw you away from the good news of forgiveness and love that is written to, through, and beyond it.

God's reputation is written on both sides of the cross, in the flesh and blood of Jesus the Christ, who gave us God's life-giving love before it, who offered us God's saving love on it, and who put its life-stealing power behind us forever with Jesus' last loving breath. The cross invites us to find our true and eternal reputation through it, and to claim it in bright Easter daylight, just around the corner.

Our Lenten devotion to the cross is almost done. We must not forget how we got

here tonight through this season of devotion. We must not forget what God has offered us through God's devotion to us.

It is finished. God's reputation is secure. The seed of a new story is anointed and wrapped, placed in the ground.

We roll the earth over it, patting it down,
sealing it with hope.

We water it with tears of regrets, gratitude,
and deepest love.

We reach out to God, in this deepest moment of darkness and silence, and we ask for all forgiveness for anything and everything which we have yet to abandon that would separate us from full and complete trust in the saving reputation of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

The full glory of God awaits us.

The salvation of our eternal reputation awaits us.

We have only one way to it.

Through.

Through.

Through.