

Good Friday, April 10, 2020

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When I lived in a small town on the Oregon Coast, the congregation I served had just enough of an obscure address that it was difficult for people to find. When a visitor came to town, I got used to giving these simple instructions: turn right on the coastal highway at the Golden Arches, or turn left if you're going the other direction and once you turn, you'll see the church building straight ahead.

You couldn't miss the Golden Arches. It was one of the taller signs on the highway and when I said "golden arches," people knew what I meant. Who isn't familiar with the golden arches? Whether you enjoy McDonald's comfort food or not, you know that sign. It pops up in places all over the world, not unlike Starbucks, KFC, Pizza Hut, Burger King and many more.

Flags are hoisted high, too. If you drive beyond Blaine and cross over the US/Canadian border, there at the Peace Arch you'll see both the Canadian flag and the American flag waving high. There's a house in our neighborhood, only a block or two away with a flagpole in the front yard and on occasion our neighbor will raise a Mariners flag or a Seahawks flag. These things we hold up high with pride.

We hold up signs and placards at games and rallies and demonstrations, showing support for a team, a cause, a candidate, or, holding up signs of protest.

We hold these things high because we want to draw people's attention - to say something, to sell something, to reveal what is important to us. We want to lift them high for all to see.

There is a sign or symbol or emblem, if you will, held high by Christians. The cross is held high. You will find crosses on top of high church steeples, prominently displayed in our worship spaces. Every Sunday, at church, the processional cross is held high at the start of worship and at the sending, leading us out into the world.

The cross is a strange sign to lift up high. By no means, does it convey a sense of pride. It is, in no way, a symbol of success or winning, nor does it promote a side or a cause. Strange, because it is, after all, a sign of death and failure, out of kilter and out of sync with those things we normally want to promote or make conspicuous.

Yet, it is all together consistent with Jesus' words before Pilate: "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over ... But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."

In the moments before his death, during his trial, while being interrogated by Pontius Pilate, Jesus admits that the Kingdom of God is out of sync with the kingdoms of empire, the rulers and dominant powers of the world. To hold up the sign of this kingdom is strange indeed, but remember what Jesus says, "My kingdom is not from here..."

I really treasure the rituals of the Good Friday liturgy, especially the Adoration of the Cross. About half way through the service, someone carries a large, wooden, rough-hewn cross into the worship space. As the cross is brought forward, three times the presider says: "Behold, the life-giving cross on which was hung the salvation of the whole world." Each time, the assembly responds: "Oh, come let us worship him."

Once the Cross is placed in the bare chancel area, people in the assembly are given opportunity to come forward, one by one, to gather around the cross for prayer. During this time, people light candles, sing songs, and listen to the chancel choir provide beautiful music. People are free to touch the cross, kneel before it, or reverence it in some way. Some folks linger there for a long while. It's a powerful moment, especially seeing the progression of one lighted candle slowly become a sea of lighted candles around this simple, wooden, rough-hewn cross.

I have vivid memories from last year noticing children, youth, younger adults and older adults gather around the cross for prayer. At times, someone would take the hand of another person into their hand or rest their hand on another person's shoulder. It was as if the whole world was streaming to the foot of the cross to pray to God, leaning into the mercy of God around this sing lifted high providing light and life.

For me, that experience was numinous, a kind of liminal place, a sacred time.

There is no better sign to gather around, the rally around, to lift high.

Do you find that to be true? And do you find that to be especially true in these days of quarantine? Working from home and being sequestered from so many activities means we cannot depend upon or access our usual sources of strength or joy or life. And it exposes the futility of believing that we are in control, self-reliant and all powerful. Good Friday is a much needed reminder of where need to turn for hope, strength, solace and purpose. Our usual signs, lifted high, reveal human ingenuity, strength, identity, power, but the counter-intuitive act of lifting high the cross reveals the power and source of life that it at the very heart of who God is. God is love and God's love heals, sustains, makes whole, and makes life new.

In the summer of 2006, Britt and I were in Rome and one of the beautiful places we visited was the church of San Clemente. High in the apse of the basilica is a mosaic that remains as stunning and beautiful now as it was in the 12th century.

In the center of the mosaic you find Jesus on the cross. The top of the cross goes high up into the heavens and the base of the cross is rooted deeply into the earth. At the base of the Cross is a large, green plant. Flowing from the cross down through the plant are four sources of water, the four rivers of paradise restored, pouring out into the earth. At the water source you see deer slacking their thirst and along the flow of water you see all kinds of creatures, animals and people. From the plant at the base of the cross is a great network of branches and these branches fill the entire space of the mosaic. It is the vine with many branches growing from the root of the vine. Many limbs extend from the tree, extending over the whole world, in great circling motions, drawing the world to itself.

A tree of death become the tree of life. A vivid picture of the Tree of Life and the mystery we celebrate today and throughout these great three days. It is what we lift up, God's all redeeming love making the world new.

In John's Gospel, Jesus speaks of being lifted up and drawing all people to himself. Jesus here is speaking of the cross and in this same Gospel, Jesus speaks of this lifting up as the hour of glory.

The mosaic at the basilica in the church of San Clemente in Rome says that and more. All the world is being drawn to God's self and, in the process, God fills the world with redeeming love, giving the world life.

The good news of Good Friday isn't that we lift up the sign of the cross. Rather, God has lifted it up. God has transformed a shameful sign of death into a sign of life. That's what God does. God doesn't create or engineer times of death or war or pandemics of suffering but steps into these places to dwell with us and from these places, God does something new. As we hunker down in these days of global suffering and panic and loss, I wonder what God is doing new.

The sign of life isn't merely lifted up. The cross was traced upon your brow in baptism. It's an indelible mark. It will not go away. It's a sign that the kingdom of God is not from here and a sign that places you into the world to be practitioners of God's holy work of love that heals, saves, redeems, and makes all things new.

We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you.

By your holy cross, you have redeemed the world. Amen