

Sermon – Good Friday 2026

Scripture Texts: Genesis 22:1-18; Psalm 22; Hebrews 4:14-16, 5:7-9; John 18:1-19:42
Sermon preached at Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') Episcopal Church

Focus Statement:

Loving God: May my spoken words be faithful to your written Word, and lead us all to better know the living WORD, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Outline:

1. What is “good” about Good Friday?
 - a. We should find the cross to be somewhat offensive!
 - i. Psalm 22 captures some of the horror of this day, when Jesus died as an innocent victim of state-sponsored violence.
 - ii. Throughout history, Christians have offered many responses to this question, many reasons why what happened on this day might be considered good.
 - b. One possible response is found in our reading from Genesis today.
 - i. This is also a disturbing story. Abraham has longed and prayed for this child for decades, and now God devises this seemingly sadistic test for Abraham by telling him to sacrifice his beloved child.
 - ii. Abraham does not question God, but sets off for the appointed place. One wonders what was going through his head. Even more, what was going through Sarah’s head? Did Abraham even tell her? I would guess not.
 - iii. In the end, Abraham is willing to go through with the sacrifice, but an angel stops him, and an alternate sacrifice is provided – a lamb is killed in Issac’s place.
 - iv. And, thousands of years later, another parent goes through with the sacrifice. God sends God’s own son to die on our behalf. Jesus is the lamb, whose life is given so that we might not die.
 - c. But is this actually good? Why should God require a child to be sacrificed in order for us to be forgiven? If we call this good, what is to stop us from further justifying death? This kind of theology is what leads to our government claiming, today, that we need to spend 1.5 Trillion on our military in the coming year – \$4385 per man / woman / child. I want to say very clearly that this cannot be good.
2. Reimagining Abraham
 - a. Madeline L’Engle’s account of a short story from God’s perspective (*The Rock That Is Higher*, pages 129-130). The angel is rejoicing that Abraham passed God’s test, but God looks sad. When queried, God says that Abraham actually failed the test by choosing law over love.
 - b. God does not desire death and sacrifice!
 - c. Further exegesis also indicates that this story is meant to challenging the practice of human / child sacrifice.
 - i. In Abraham’s time, child sacrifice was a more common practice.

- ii. Even the people of Israel considered the first born as belonging to God, and the law would eventually require parents to make a sacrifice on behalf of each firstborn child.
 - iii. This story is making the point that God does not demand child sacrifice. This is not something that Israel is to do. Even the sacrifice of an animal is an accommodation of God to a bloodthirsty people.
 - d. God does not demand human sacrifice – but we too often do!
- 3. The scapegoat mechanism
 - a. René Girard – historian, philosopher, anthropologist: studied the universality of sacrifice across human history and human cultures, and recognized the importance of the scapegoat mechanism.
 - i. Human civilization is always threatened by our propensity for violence. When we are scared or angry or insecure, we all too often turn to violence – and violence always breeds more violence.
 - ii. But, that tendency toward violence can, Girard posits, be controlled and channeled. It can be directed at a single victim, or a small group of victims, who are sacrificed for the sake of everyone else.
 - iii. And, this scapegoating behavior relieves the fear and anger and insecurity that can otherwise erupt into devastating violence – at the cost of the victims who are sacrificed.
 - b. Darkness of Scapegoating
 - i. This sacrifice has very often been borne by animals – which is why animal sacrifice has been a part of almost every human culture at some point in history.
 - ii. But, the problem is that scapegoating works even when it is not a goat who is sacrificed. All too often, we find human victims to blame, regardless of whether they are innocent.
 - iii. We see this in how the Nazi’s blamed the Jews for Germany’s defeat in WWI and rallied the nation. We see this in how McCarthy harnessed American fears about communism into witch hunts. We see this in Black Americans being dehumanized through Jim Crow laws and lynching to restore a sense of white power after the civil war. We see this in how the LGBT community was blamed for AIDS and subjected to shame and dehumanization. We see this today in how immigrants are being blamed for our economic insecurity.
 - c. And, we see this in Jesus, who even Pilate acknowledged to be innocent.
 - i. The people demanded his death because their security was threatened. Pilate eventually acquiesced because his power was threatened.
 - ii. But, instead of calling down armies of angels to wipe out his enemies, Jesus bows his head and gives up his spirit. His final words, “It is finished” speak to the cycle of death and sacrifice and scapegoating.
 - iii. By being a willing sacrifice who does not strike back, Jesus exposes and breaks the cycle of violence. His is the sacrifice to end sacrificing.
- 4. A new community of solidarity
 - a. The end of sacrifice and of scapegoating is good news in and of itself, but the cross does more than that. It offers a new kind of community, based not the blood of a victim, but on solidarity with the victim.

- i. Jesus is God's long-promised king, but his crown is of thorns and his throne is a cross. In wearing this crown and ascending to this throne, Jesus lifts up all of the other victims of human history.
 - ii. He lives and dies in solidarity with these victims, these scapegoats. In his sacrifice, their lives are seen and honored.
- b. We could, and must, ultimately go further than that! The resurrection will have more to say to and on behalf of those victims! But, for today, let's end here.
- c. Good Friday is good because Jesus gives his life to end the cycle of violence and sacrifice and scapegoating that has defined human history. Through his cross, he stands in solidarity with the victims of that dark history, insisting that they be seen and honored. And, following his example, we are also called to care for those victims, to stand against the scapegoat mechanism, and to testify that God's love is not contingent on sacrifice, but calls us all to a deeper unity.

Amen.