

Closing Night

Good Friday + April 2, 2021

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

The Rev. Patrick Raymond, Rector

Three weeks ago, several parishioners excitedly contacted me, to make sure I had seen an article in the March 11 New York Times. The story featured longtime Ascension member Edward Minioka, and his lifelong, sophisticated love of the arts, and what it's been like for him to go for an entire year, as a result of the pandemic, without attending a single live show or performance.

The story also described an annual series of weeknight salons that Edward has hosted in his home since 1978, bringing together art lovers, curators, collectors, and critics. "It's amazing," he says in the article, "*the conversations that happen around midnight.*" These salons were mentioned in part because they, also, have been a casualty of the pandemic.

The story ends with the author asking if the salons will be revived when the pandemic ends. Edward says no. "I'm too old ... *It's a lot of work.*" And then he added, " ... *it's nice to end something when you don't know it's the closing night.*"

Jesus was not so lucky. He also had seen countless shows through countless seasons: shows of human arrogance, folly and blindness. His own late-night salons with religious leaders invariably brought out their arrogance, jealousy and fear. And immediately after the curtain rose on the Passion Gospel from John that we just heard, we learn that Jesus knew *all that was to befall him*. He knew that his own closing night was coming, and that it would include and result in scenes of betrayal, denial, cynicism and violence ...

Contemplating the Passion and death of Jesus, the priest and author Cynthia Bourgeault writes, "*The spectacle of an innocent and good man destroyed by the powers of this world is an archetypal human experience. It elicits our deepest feelings of remorse and empathy (and if we're honest, our own deepest shadows as well).*"¹

Bourgeault also emphasizes, however, that the Passion and death of Jesus far transcend this cast of human characters and this particular spectacle. Having this greatly expanded view puts her in alignment with the Gospel of John, where from the beginning Christ's divine nature and mission are vast and timeless and where, even so, right from the start, we can imagine a tragic closing night. "*He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.*" (John 1:10-11)

The name of Jesus is not used in this gospel until well into Chapter 1, where John the Baptist publicly hails and introduces him as "*.. the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*" (1:29) Any faithful and literate Jew, then or now, would presume this to be a direct reference to the lambs slaughtered at the Passover for the deliverance of God's people. Only in this gospel does the crucifixion of Christ take place on the same day and at the same hour as the annual offering and sacrifice of the Passover lambs at the Temple in Jerusalem.

Christ's foreknowledge of his closing night and what would follow is also uniquely conveyed in the Gospel of John by way of the repeated mention of *the hour*. You may recall the words of Jesus from the Gospel for the Fifth Sunday in Lent: "*The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.*" We heard it again in the Gospel for our Maundy Thursday liturgy, last night: "*Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.*"

In the eye of this gospel writer, the love that begins to come into full view here is shown in the ensuing washing of the feet of his followers, after which Jesus invokes and commands love, a dozen times, in the long farewell discourse and in what we call his high priestly prayer, his final prayer before the start of his Passion. Showing us the love of God that cannot be mistaken or distorted or snuffed out, Jesus now endures betrayal and denial that he long knew would be part of his closing night. Love continues, in spite of and through and by way of his mock trial and torture, and even as he is lifted high upon the cross.

Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. Jesus saw it all coming. He knew the hour. He knew all that it would cost him. And he loved them, as he loves us, to the end.

¹ *Scapegoating and the Cross*, Cynthia Bourgeault, from the daily devotion for April 1, 2021, from The Center for Contemplation and Action.