

Good Friday, April 19, 2019, Church of the Ascension

*All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:6)*

In an essay titled **Broken Continuities: "Night" and "White Crucifixion"** (*Christian Century*, November 4, 1987, p. 963.), a religion professor named Karl Plank writes:

Around 3:00 A. M. on November 10, 1938, gaping darkness began to spew the flames that were to burn unabated for the next seven years. On this night Nazi mobs executed a well-planned "spontaneous outrage" throughout the precincts of German Jewry. Synagogues were burned, their sacred objects profaned and destroyed; Jewish dwellings were ransacked, their contents strewn and pillaged. Shattering the windows of Jewish shops, the growing swarm left businesses in ruin. Uprooting tombstones and desecrating Jewish graves, the ghoulish throng violated even the sanctuary of the dead . . . A chilling harbinger of nights yet to come, the events of this November darkness culminated in widespread arrest of Jewish citizens and led to their transport to concentration camps. Nazi propagandists, struck by a perverse poetry, gave to this night the name by which it has endured in memory: *Kristallnacht*, the night of broken glass. Irony abounds in such a name, for in the litter of shattered windows lies more than bits of glass. *Kristallnacht* testifies to a deeper breaking of basic human continuities. Shattered windows leave faith in fragments and pierce the wholeness of the human spirit.

In that same year of 1938 a Jewish artist Marc Chagall would complete a remarkable painting titled *White Crucifixion*. (It lives close to us now, at the Art Institute of Chicago).

The Russian Jew depicts a crucified Christ, skirted with a tallith (the traditional Jewish prayer shawl) and encircled by a kaleidoscopic whirl of images that narrates the progress of a Jewish pogrom. Over his head, an inscription in Hebrew letters: Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.

Whatever the cross of Christ might mean for any of us, in 1938, Chagall shows how it was circumscribed by the realities of Holocaust.

Plank continues:

Chagall does not intend to Christianize his painting. Rather, in the chaotic world of *White Crucifixion* all are unredeemed, caught in a vortex of destruction binding crucified victim and modern martyr. As the prayer shawl wraps the loins of the crucified figure, Chagall makes clear that the Christ and the Jewish sufferer are one. Chagall's Messiah, this Jew of the cross, is no rescuer, but himself hangs powerless before the chaotic fire.

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? *
and are so far from my cry and from the words of my distress? (Psalm 22)*

In his imagery of the Crucified, Chagall accuses the Christian in his blunt portrayal of a Jewish Jesus and the connection between him and the profound human suffering visited upon the Jewish victims of the Holocaust.

In the face of such human suffering, how dare a Christian proclaim the victory of the Cross and an impending Easter triumph? A question for every Good Friday.

*like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.*

By a perversion of justice, he was taken away. (Isaiah 53:7-8)

Holocaust—a category of suffering and tragedy and human inhumanity to our fellow creatures almost beyond comprehension -- but an all too common fact of human existence.

- The victims of the gas chambers at Auschwitz, have terrible companions in those who were slaughtered in Rwanda, Bosnia, in American lynchings, and in South American disappearings.
- A holocaust of terror has devastated peoples in every part of the world and created the tragedy of the people of Syria and the crisis of unnumbered refugees from every corner of the planet.
- The violence of gangs and drugs fuels the desperate flight of central American asylum seekers who now suffer on our own border.

So many Victims who comprehend the terrible truth of crucifixion.

Any word of redemption is facile and shallow, when it is delivered by not so innocent bystanders to it all.

And maybe sometimes that is where we find ourselves – finding it hard to stay with it, to probe the pain, to confront the guilt, to seek the truth of God, amidst the anxieties of our lives and world.

*But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed. (Isaiah 53:5)*

It has taken 40 days of Lent and most of a Week we call Holy to get us to a Cross. The journey challenges us to learn of holiness from one who is stripped naked, nailed up like a scarecrow on a wooden pole.

Tonight, we make the most dangerous claim of gospel faith -- that it is God who hangs there, hurting, vulnerable, accessible, unprotected. A victim. Our victim.

Forgive and forget we like to say.

But this Friday we call ‘good’ intends to make us remember.

To remember that the hurt we do to others or the wounds we have suffered at another’s hand cannot be simply erased; the scars wiped away like chalk from a blackboard.

- Good Friday intends to make us look upon the consequences of human hate and greed and the lust for power.
- To forget mocks the sufferings that human beings inflict upon one another.
- To forget is to trivialize the monstrous as if it did not matter.
- So Good Friday makes us remember -- remember that nothing, not even resurrection can cancel out this crucifixion, every crucifixion.

In the shadow of the cross, we are always the guilty bystanders. Chagall's painting confronts us with a world of victims. As do the heartbreaking headlines that mark our daily lives.

Nearly 2000 mass shootings since the slaughter of innocents at Sandy Hook in 2012 and the highest number of gun deaths in the developed world – a holocaust of suicides and homicides.

The children of Yemen are starving to death; this nation is complicit in an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, a holocaust that we could alleviate if we chose.

This country has the worse maternal and infant mortality rates of any developed nation. Babies are dying. And are we surprised that the outcomes are far worse for women and children of color. A holocaust rendered invisible by our inattention.

Good Friday stops us in our tracks and intends to shatter our certainties and probe our complicity in the crucifixions of our time and place. We may not rush away too quickly now or presume that an empty tomb will make it all okay. The utter brokenness and persistent pain of something precious accuses us. Horrific realities must not be trivialized by the comfortable prop of resurrection faith.

To approach the cross with too much faith, to stand in its shadow with certain confidence of Easter light, is finally to confront no cross at all, only the unrepentant echoes of our religious noise, says Karl Plank.

It is only when we are ready to turn to the victims, to stand with the victims, to hold them in our embrace and weep for all that has been endured, for all who have been lost, then something more may be possible.

Jesus' cross and all the crosses that mark our lives invite us first into silence. This holy day is for listening and for silence.

It is not when we speak to victims but only when we listen to their testimony that we can truly perceive the cross. It is not our story to tell; it is ours to hear.

As we are called to hear tonight the heart-breaking artistry of John the evangelist and listen to the testimony of the Crucified Messiah.

- Chagall's White Crucifixion accuses us of complacency in the face of the passion of others.
- The Johannine Crucifixion calls us into the passion of the world, through the passion of the Christ.

Humility and repentance and courage and love are all that can turn us from onlookers to witnesses – to the possibility of a new community of victims and witnesses who will wait together for the Kingdom of God.

