The Rev. James Richardson  
Good Friday 2019  
7:30 pm

Tonight, Christians all over the world gather to remember the murder of an innocent Jewish Holy Man – a rabbi – at the hands of a ruthless dictatorship, the Roman Empire.

In the Gospel of John – which we just heard a few moments ago – the events of Golgotha, the Place of the Skull, are described in terms of fulfilling the Scriptures, proving that Jesus is the embodiment of God’s glory on earth.

And so this is, as we shall see.

But on this first Good Friday, a day that must have felt anything but good, there was just the deafening silence of death.

We gather tonight amidst the symbols of this death — symbols that have perhaps grown too familiar and too heavy with religious baggage across the span of two thousand years.

While these images might still inspire us, some might also mislead us.

In depictions of art, and in the words of hymns and prayers, we proclaim that Jesus was lifted “high on the Cross,” as if elevating him put him a little closer to Heaven – and a little farther away from us.

But this is not how it was on this day we now call “Good Friday.”

This is not how it was at all.

The Cross the Romans used for executing prisoners was low to the ground so that people walking by could see the horror up close. That was the point, you see.

“We are your God,” the Romans with their crosses declared. “There is no other.”

For the followers of Jesus, it wasn’t supposed to end this way. Jesus had entered Jerusalem something of a local hero. He had cured the sick, confronted the corrupt and powerful – and got away with it, time after time.

He taught every day at the Temple, and he shared his table with outcasts, tax collectors, lepers and even women. He exploded social taboos right and left.

But by so doing, he challenged the rigid social order, and that posed a mortal threat to the Roman Empire.

The only God possible was the God of Order, and that God was the Emperor of the Roman Empire.

“We are your God, there is no other.”

So, the Romans got their hands on Jesus, and all of their brutality spilled forth to break him.
We... are... your... God.
There... is... no... other.
Jesus was arrested, tortured and nailed hand and foot to a wooden cross to die a slow painful death.
The Cross was an assembly line of death.
It is likely that many, many human beings, one after the other, were executed by the Romans on the same wooden cross.
Wood was at a premium in the desert, and the Romans would not have wasted a wooden cross on a single prisoner.
When the cross had become so splintered with nails, or so rotted with blood, and could no longer hold its victims, it was discarded or burned.
No one likely venerated that cross or collected splinters as souvenirs on the day Jesus hung on it. Making crosses into jewelry would come much, much later. In the time of Jesus, the cross was a revolting sight.
Devout Jews walked on the other side of the road and averted their eyes. And why wouldn’t they? It was a hideous way to die.
There was another reason to avert the eyes from the cross. Death on the cross was a sure sign that the condemned prisoner was headed to Hell itself.
To avert the eyes was a final act of shunning in a world governed by rules of honor and shame.
But some did watch. The women who followed Jesus watched to the end. For them on this terrible day, the Cross had no meaning at all except as a tool of terror. All they could do on that day, at the foot of the Cross, was weep – and wait.
Over the centuries, theologians have spilled much ink – and much blood – debating what the Cross means.
Maybe some of these ideas we take too much for granted.
One of these ideas, the doctrine of atonement – the idea of Jesus dying to paying a ransom to God in blood – comes primarily from the Letter to the Hebrews, by an anonymous author, that we hear tonight.
This idea has hung heavily through the centuries – maybe too heavily.
In the movie, the Life of Pi, a Hindu lad, Pi, talks with a Christian priest who tells him that God so loves the world that he sends his only Son to the Cross.
But Pi tells the priest, that makes no sense.
Why would a loving God punish the weak and innocent to pay a ransom for the sins of the powerful and guilty?
“What kind of love is that?” Pi asks.
Indeed, what kind of love is that? Maybe Pi is onto something. Maybe we should look at this another way.

By dying in the worst way a human being could die – on an executioner’s Cross – Jesus goes to where people suffer; to where people are victims at the hands of the powerful – and the indifferent.

By willingly going to the Cross, Jesus shows us his true nature – as the God incarnate, the Holy One, experiencing everything humanity experiences, even suffering and death.

By going to the Cross, Jesus stands with the weak and innocent.

Living and dying this way is the deepest meaning of the incarnation of God becoming as one of us, a human being, in Jesus Christ.

Jesus goes to the Cross not as a ransom to a blood thirsty God, but as the divine One willing to walk with us through the Valley of the Shadow of Death and forgive us everything before we ever ask.

The incarnate God of the Cross, Jesus, is with us in the hospital rooms and on the battlefields; in the refugee camps and prison cells; and everywhere in this wounded world that longs for hope and healing.

The incarnate God of the Cross – Jesus – dies to show us the way beyond the Cross, to show us there is more to life than death; that death itself is only a horizon beyond which we cannot yet see.

And the Holy One who is crucified, Jesus, goes to hell itself to break the shackles of evil in this world.

This is what it means to be the Christ – the anointed One of God we follow – the Savior of the world who hangs tonight on the Cross.