

Humanity at its best and worst (John 18:1-19:42)

On Good Friday, Jesus turns the power of the state on its head.

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April 16, 2025

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Apart from six years, I've lived in Kansas my entire life, smack in the middle of tornado alley. A year before I was born, a tornado of the largest classification at the time whipped through Wichita and Andover, two cities I would call home for more than 20 years. The tornado killed 17 people and destroyed a trailer park in Andover.

Harrowing stories about the infamous '91 tornado were cautionary tales that succeeded in spooking me enough to seek refuge in the basement whenever I heard the sirens blare. Even so, the ubiquity of tornadoes in Kansas often elicits jokes about native Kansans sitting on their front porches in awe during tornado warnings. Despite the violence they can inflict, tornadoes also provoke such wonder that people make a habit of chasing them. For these folks, at the same time that tornadoes represent the worst parts of nature, they also represent some of the most stunning.

On Good Friday, we participate in the act of remembering another kind of paradox. At the same time that the cross on which Jesus died represents the very worst in humankind, it is also the very moment in which we can be sure that there is something fundamentally loveable about humankind.

Crucifixion was the execution method of choice reserved for rebels and insurrectionists, for those who threatened the political power of the state and, more importantly, of the emperor. Jesus' very being and reign of love were threatening enough to the political powers of the day that he was to be made an example of. It just so happened that the example was not what those who sentenced Jesus to die had originally conceived.

In the several chapters preceding John 18, Jesus spends time showing love to his disciples through footwashing, giving the gift of the Holy Spirit, commanding them to love one another, and praying for them. Then Jesus demonstrates the ultimate act of loving solidarity when he willingly gives himself over to be arrested, admits to claims levied against him, carries his own cross on the walk to crucifixion, and gives up his own spirit. In going willingly, Jesus turns the power of the state on its head and instead makes an example of what it means to rule with loving solidarity for the oppressed in our midst.

On Good Friday, there is nowhere to hide. The way we treat the oppressed is laid bare before us. Like all other pain, the pain of Good Friday demands to be felt, not skipped past for the niceties of Easter. It is in feeling the pain in its fullness that we draw closer to the marvel of the crucified God and the true meaning of the love embodied for us.