

Getting Back to Good Friday

By PAUL J. SCHARF

Not too many people think much about Good Friday anymore.

There was a time when whole communities were virtually shut down on Good Friday afternoon. Businesses closed, or at least allowed their employees to attend church services. I'm sure some still do this—but I wonder how many people in the general public would even know what we mean when we talk about *Good Friday*.

Growing up in a confessional Lutheran setting, I have vivid memories of Passion Week. For us, it meant going to a communion service on Maundy Thursday evening, followed by another communion service on Good Friday afternoon. Good Friday evening was a Tenebrae service, which focused on the seven sayings of Christ from the cross—ending in darkness and silence. We picked up there with the sunrise service on Easter Sunday morning, followed by Easter breakfast and the regular Easter worship service.

Walking through these events anew each spring made a stunning, lifelong impression on my young mind. It was as if I had been transported back to experience these things firsthand.

I attempted to recreate the best of these traditions surrounding Passion Week in the churches I pastored, but found my quest to be largely unfruitful. I'll never forget one response to a proposal to hold a Good Friday service at 3 p.m. "You want me to come to church in the afternoon ... on a weekday?!"

Many in our ranks are leery of the church calendar, and with good reason. Some protest that Good Friday is tied too closely to Lent, which they view as anathema. I certainly understand that Lent has troubling historical and theological connotations, and I am not advocating for us to implement it in our churches. However, if one were to be entirely consistent with this point of view, he would, of necessity, also need to discard Palm Sunday and Easter, which we likewise receive from the church calendar. Very few are willing to go that far, it seems. So, what's the hang-up with Good Friday?

I find a spiritual disconnect in planning an elaborate Resurrection Sunday morning service with no emotional preparation. The shout goes forward with exuberance, "He is risen!" Forgive me for wanting to ask, "Risen from what?" I wonder if there are some new believers—or especially children—in the congregation who genuinely do not know. They have not been spiritually primed to bellow out the chords of "Christ the Lord is Risen Today,"ⁱ simply because they have not first stood metaphorically "Beneath the Cross of Jesus."ⁱⁱ They had not even remotely considered how it was that "Hosanna, loud hosanna the little children sang."ⁱⁱⁱ Lacking the basis of Good Friday, they are not the least bit ready to engage with the Biblical reality of the resurrection.

I know that many of our churches do have some type of Good Friday—or other special Passion Week—service for teaching, remembrance and worship. And my point is not to shame those who do not. I would like to encourage us never to lose sight of some vital truths, however. We have innumerable resources, and we're swimming in opportunities to learn. Yet we may be raising a spiritual generation of Easter illiterates.

What can you do if you have nowhere to gather with other believers this Good Friday?

Well, you may not be in a large auditorium listening to a robed choir, but the good news is that you can still redeem this day spiritually. Find some special sacred music to enjoy. Watch a great sermon online. Study the Jewish Passover Seder and learn how Jesus transformed it into the Lord's Supper! Above all else, take your Bible and a harmony of the gospels and grow in your understanding of the events of this signal day. Read the crucifixion passages in all four gospels in chronological order, and meditate on their significance. Go back to Calvary, and relive that dreadful, yet wonderful, day.

Easter is early this year. I wonder how many of us have really taken time to prepare for it. If that includes you—take heart. The first disciples weren't ready either (cf. Mark 14:50). Like them, I hope that we will be stunned with the truth of the resurrection on Sunday (cf. Luke 24:41)! But it won't happen without first getting back to Good Friday.

For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures. (1 Cor. 15:3-4)

Have a great Good Friday—and a most blessed Easter Sunday.

Paul J. Scharf (M.A., M.Div., Faith Baptist Theological Seminary) is a church ministries representative for The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, based in Columbus, WI, and serving in the Midwest. For more information on his ministry, visit sermonaudio.com/pscharf or foi.org/scharf, or email pscharf@foi.org.

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ⁱ Charles Wesley; "Christ the Lord is Risen Today." Public domain. Taken from "Christ the Lord is risen today;" Hymnary.org; n.d.; https://hymnary.org/text/christ_the_lord_is_risen_today_wesley; Internet; accessed 27 March 2024.

ⁱⁱ Elizabeth Cecilia Clephane; "Beneath the Cross of Jesus." Public domain. Taken from "Beneath the Cross of Jesus;" Hymnary.org; n.d.; https://hymnary.org/text/beneath_the_cross_of_jesus_i_fain_would; Internet; accessed 27 March 2024.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jennette Threlfall; "Hosanna, Loud Hosanna." Public domain. Taken from "Hosanna, Loud Hosanna;" Hymnary.org; n.d.; https://hymnary.org/text/hosanna_loud_hosanna_the_little_children; Internet; accessed 27 March 2024.