

Maundy Thursday

John Wilkinson
Third Presbyterian Church
March 29, 2018

“Jesus walked this lonesome valley

He had to walk it by himself

O, nobody else could walk it for him

He had to walk it by himself.”

Death is on our hearts, and minds, tonight, and tomorrow. I do not say that to be morbid, or depressing. It’s the truth. Ever since his ministry began, Jesus knew how it would end up, even if we didn’t. Death. So death is on our hearts and minds.

Seeing “The Diary of Anne Frank,” what wrenched my heart was Anne’s father recounting her final days at Bergen-Belsen. What was it like –this precious, joyful life – to know that its end was imminent in such a horrific way?

I wonder, too, how the Parkland students felt – those who were murdered and those who survived.

Even as I wonder how young people in Rochester neighborhoods live each day knowing that death is ever-present, for them or for those they love.

Not to mention those we know and love, you, perhaps, who live with death. We all do, of course, but for some it is more immediate, because of age or illness or circumstance.

Jesus knew how it would end up, even if we didn’t. What is remarkable to me, always, and beyond remarkable, is that he did walk this lonesome valley, by himself. The fully human part of him knew, knew that it would come early, that it would be awful. Yet that’s the valley he walked.

Religious historian Phyllis Tickle received a terminal lung cancer diagnosis at 81. “I’ve reared my children. I’ve buried my husband. I’ve done the work I think I came to do,” she said. “Now I can go.”

The Rev. Vernal Harris lost his two sons to sickle cell disease. Both died in excruciating pain, and Harris felt that loss interrupted his relationship with God. “I could not believe that the God I have preached about so, that at a time when I needed him, he left me to bear this by myself.” It took having a dream about his son Paul, a full year later, before he felt God’s presence in his life again.

"We must walk this lonesome valley.

We have to walk it by ourselves.

O, nobody else can walk it for us.

We have to walk it by ourselves."

We have to walk it by ourselves. Except, with all due respect, that's not quite right. On Monday we sang "I want Jesus to walk with me." That's more true, I believe. That when feeling alone, lost, even when we walk in the valley of the shadow of death, we do not walk that valley by ourselves. That doesn't eliminate death, remove it, or sanitize it. But it does relocate it.

Terrance Klein writes that "we can pass through the dark flood waters of death only because Christ has fathomed their depths and returned to carry us over them. Of course," Klein says, "it defies all sense. Yet, what else but the senselessness of resurrection can conquer the senselessness of death?"

Kate Bowler teaches church history at Duke Divinity School. At 35 she was diagnosed with Stage 4 colon cancer. She has written a popular book about her experience: *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved*. She said this in an interview: "...The part that precedes the resurrection is the death... And part of the beauty of coming to the end of yourself, and realizing you might not be quite as special or quite as original as you imagined, is the part where you end and God begins. And you can say...the best part about me is not me, is it? It is this new thing that God is always doing."

"He had to walk it by himself." But because he did, we don't.

We will all face death, walk our own valleys. For some it will be at the end of a life lived long and well. For some it will be unjust, unfair, tragic. But never, ever, will it be alone. Jesus walks with us. Even now. (The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper follows...)