

*Good Friday Lament*

Luke 23:42-43; Psalm 22:22-25

March 21, 2008

by Dr. Frank Trotter

What was it that prompted one of the thieves who was hanging on his cross to call across and say, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”?

Someone once said that the best prayers, the ones that are the most heartfelt and authentic, are also the shortest. Anne Lamott, a writer who without apology writes from a faith perspective, says that she has prayer down to a single word: “Help!”

The lament that we offer to God when we’re honest enough to pray “Help!” acknowledges that far too much of our world, for far too many people, is not a safe place. For many the world is a horror of devastation and destruction, vulnerability and sorrow, of alienation and dysfunction. In Martin Luther’s most famous hymn, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” he affirms that ours is a “world with devils filled, that threaten to undo us.” Sometimes the devils and the darkness come at our own invitation.

Brad Sachs, a contemporary poet, offers for our reflection on this day of confession an autobiographical poem entitled, “A Boy in a Bed in the Dark”<sup>1</sup>:

Born with a cleft palate,  
My two-year-old brother,  
Recovering from yet another surgery,  
Toddled into our bedroom  
Toppled a tower of blocks  
That I had patiently built  
And in a five-year-old’s fury  
I grabbed a fallen block  
And winged it at him  
Ripping open his carefully reconstructed lip.

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<sup>1</sup> Brad Sachs, “A Boy in the Bed in the Dark”, from *In the Desperate Kingdom of Love: Poems 2001-2004* (Chestnut Hills Press, 2004), quoted at “The Writer’s Almanac with Garrison Keillor,” Friday, 18 January, 2008, [http://www.elabs7.com/functions/message\\_view.html?mid=372022&mlid=499&siteid=20130&uid=c789941005](http://www.elabs7.com/functions/message_view.html?mid=372022&mlid=499&siteid=20130&uid=c789941005).

The next hours were gruesomely compressed  
Ending with a boy in a bed in the dark  
Mute with fear  
Staring out into the hallway with horror  
As the pediatrician went in and out of the bathroom  
With one vast blood-soaked towel after another  
Shaking his head worriedly.  
My brother's howls  
And my parents' cooed comfort  
Became the soundtrack to this milky movie  
That plays  
In my darkest theatre,  
The one that I sidle past each night  
With a shudder  
And a throb in my fist

It is not a great leap from the throb in any of our fists to the death and destruction that seem to arise all so easily in every land, in every city, among every people on the face of the earth. On this Good Friday, our world is not a great deal different from the climate of hate and fear that gripped Jerusalem on that first Good Friday so long ago.

At the end of this past year, there were approximately fifteen so-called "major wars" in the world, defined by the United Nations as wars that inflict at least 1,000 military deaths per year, as well as over twenty "lesser conflicts." On March 20, smack in the middle of Holy Week, the world marked the beginning of the fifth year of the Iraq war. Some point to encouraging signs that the war is finally producing positive results; others are appalled as the toll of lives lost continues to rise – over 4,000 American troops so far and almost 90,000 Iraqi deaths that can be absolutely verified. Despite our differing interpretations of the war, what is absolutely clear is that the cost of this war in human lives and in money spent are staggering. For me, it is an offence against God on a day when we remember God's great love for all humanity.

In moments like these filled with painful confession, the Hebrew Psalmist is confident about the God whom he worships – a God who counsels and instructs, a God who does not abandon us. As Rob Bell, one of Fuller Seminary's more well-known recent graduates, says, "There is nothing we can do to make God love us less."

That is a powerful affirmation for all of us who hang on our own crosses next to Jesus, knowing that we are complicitous in his crucifixion. And yet, in our confession, in our desperation we cry out “Help!” to this man. “Jesus,” we plead, “remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Amazingly, Jesus does just that. “Today,” he tells all of us thieves, “today because of your faith, because you have dared to ask for it, you will be with me in paradise.” Then he turns the tables on us and calls us to be “wounded healers” in the words of theologian Henri Nouwen.

William Reichard, another contemporary poet, gives us another autobiographical poem entitled, “An Open Door”<sup>2</sup>:

Across the sanctuary of a community church  
a door stands ajar; stained glass windows  
allow only some of the sun to enter; filtered  
yellow, red, opalescent green drench the pews.  
On the altar converted to stage, a circle of  
students contemplates a question of vocation.  
Through the open door, only light, daytime  
invading the intimate dim familiar in churches,  
the hazy quality of the house of god.  
When a child, I wanted to be a vampire.  
Or a scientist. Or an actor. The world  
seemed open to me in a way it does not  
seem open now. What is your passion,  
the facilitator asks and students giggle.  
What drives you? I try to focus  
on the question at hand, but lose myself  
in the sunlight streaming in through  
the open door. In this, a sanctuary,  
I don't feel safe. What do you want  
to be when you grow up? Not a teacher,  
certainly; not a soldier; not a poet.  
Who lives in the gray corners of a church  
besides mice? What is that face in

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<sup>2</sup> William Reichard, “An Open Door” from *This Brightness* (Mid-List Press, 2007), quoted at “The Writer’s Almanac with Garrison Keillor,” Sunday, 30 December, 2007, [http://www.elabs7.com/functions/message\\_view.html?mid=361201&mlid=499&siteid=20130&uid=c789941005](http://www.elabs7.com/functions/message_view.html?mid=361201&mlid=499&siteid=20130&uid=c789941005).

the stained glass? When in college,  
I wanted to be an archaeologist, wanted  
to dig into the storied dirt of time and  
come up with some history. In this room  
I want to be a priest. It could be comforting,  
living in the dark spaces of a church,  
just me and the mice. What is your  
vocation, the facilitator asks and  
at this moment, I'd say, I am  
a bringer of light; a man who stands  
in a doorway flooded by sun;  
I am a bird; someone who learns,  
in shadow, the real shape of brightness.

Come, Lord Jesus, and hear our lament. Tell us once more what you told the thief on that day so long ago. Come in the midst of our darkness and despair and remind us that hopelessness of this day is not the end of the story.

Thanks be to God. Amen.