

“A Crosswise Gaze”  
 Good Friday A (April 10, 2020)  
 Scriptures: Psalm 22; John 18:1-19:42  
 Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Open our eyes that we might see wondrous things in your word, Amen.<<

Nicholas Wolterstorff, emeritus professor of theology at Yale, penned a book in the 1980s titled *Lament for a Son*. The book was unlike anything Wolterstorff had ever written before. His earlier writings were on topics like ontology, faith and reason, art history and theology, God's justice - all theological and philosophical topics. *Lament for a Son* was different. It was a fragmented lament, written by Wolterstorff after learning that his son Eric had died tragically at the age of 25 in a mountaineering accident. In a piece for *The Christian Century*, Wolterstorff remembered the moment he heard the tragic news.<sup>1</sup> “On Sunday afternoon, June 12, 1983,” he writes, “I received a phone call that shattered my comfortable life and divided it into before and after. The call was from our son Eric’s landlady in Munich, Germany, where Eric was doing research for his doctoral dissertation in architectural history. ‘Mr. Wolterstorff,’” she said, “‘I must give you some bad news.’ ‘Yes,’” he replied. “‘Eric has been climbing in the mountains and has had an accident.’ ‘Yes,’” he replied again. “‘Eric has had a serious accident,’” she said. “‘Yes.’ ‘Mr. Wolterstorff, I must tell you,’” she said, “‘Eric [has died]. Mr. Wolterstorff, are you there? ...’” “It took a couple of seconds for the reality of what I had heard to sink in,” writes Wolterstorff. “When Eric died,” he writes, “a big part of my own self was ripped out. My desires with respect to him, my commitments, my hopes, my expectations - they were no more. My expectation that he would be home for the summer was no more; my plan to attend his graduation was no more. For a month or so I caught myself still planning to do things with him, still expecting him to call. Eventually, the realization sunk in, all the way down, that he was dead. I had to learn to live around that gaping wound and with that grief. Grief was not just an additional component in my life. I had to live a new kind of life, one for which I had no practice.”

Last Sunday, Matthew Dowd wrote an article that described the moment we are all in now as a moment of “collective loss” because of the virus. “We are at a moment,” writes Dowd, “where everyone is facing some loss ... .” “For many, like me,” he writes, “it brings up the wounds of earlier losses and the grief we felt in those moments. I remember so indelibly,” he says, “the nine months spent more than a decade ago in the neonatal intensive care unit with my identical twin daughters. The memory is seared into me [every time I wash my hands, because we] wash[ed] our hands every time we spent time with our premie daughters ... . I remember,” he says, “the bells and whistles of medical devices that became background noise, the constant state of alert and the pit in my stomach when the phone rang with an update. There was our daughters’ fight for survival, and the evening [came when] one of our daughters was no longer going to make it. I held her mom, as she held in her arms one of our daughters as she breathed her last breath. The tiny, innocent life never got the chance to live outside of that room in the hospital.”

When we Christians celebrate Good Friday, we are exposing ourselves to the very darkest moments in human life. We are entering the shadows. The most painful experiences: grief, sadness, depression, pain, suffering, loss, shame, guilt, addiction, terror, violence - we are

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/first-person/grief-and-not-theologizing-about-it>

entering the “abyss” as poet Christian Wiman calls it. For it’s on this day, Good Friday - a day unlike any other day on the church calendar - when we are called to look death in the eyes. It’s on this day - a day unlike any other - that we sit with the story of Christ’s crucifixion. We strip the paraments from our communion table. We sing mournful hymns and speak of God being present at hospital beds and near wreckages, in homeless shelters and in refugee tents, and on a cross. We read Psalms of lament and we listen to pieces of music that capture the emotion - we just heard Trent Reznor’s piece *A Warm Place*.

And it’s on this day that we read the entire Passion story of Christ - a story about what theologian William Placher calls “a vulnerable God” - a God, he says, who “take[s] on all the world’s pain ... .” The Passion story is a story of betrayal: Judas, one of the disciples, sold Jesus out to the authorities. The Passion story is a story of denial: Peter denied knowing Jesus three times before the night was through. It’s a story about feckless leaders like the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate, who prized expediency over humanity, a leader who seemed to care only about himself and his image and not the suffering of the innocent. It’s a story of abuse: Jesus was beaten mercilessly by the Roman guards, who flogged him and crucified him - the very worst form of death in the ancient world. The Passion story is a story of shame and pain and loneliness and death. It’s an ancient story - the very foundation of our ancient tradition - that unflinchingly gazes into the darkest corners of the human experience. This story is for me - as it has been for countless others in the Christian tradition - this story is the main reason I can call myself a Christian.

During the third year of my PhD program at the University of Toronto - the year when I spent seven of the most stressful months of my life studying for my general exams - I got word that one of my friends, a fellow PhD student, had walked out onto the balcony of his high rise apartment and jumped to his death. He was just 29 years old. There are no words to describe the grief I and my fellow PhD students felt. We held a memorial service for him in our department, and played Bob Dylan’s song *Forever Young*, which voiced some of what we all felt. One of my friends also posted on Facebook Trent Reznor’s song *A Warm Place*, which captured some of our grief. But one thing that helped me through that time was the story of Christ’s Passion. A Passion story that theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer once described as a story of “help.” “Christ helps us,” wrote Bonhoeffer from a Nazi prison, Christ helps us “not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering ... . Only the suffering God can help,” said Bonhoeffer. The God who knows intimately the suffering of humanity. And isn’t this what the Passion story teaches us? It’s a theological story about God entering into the very worst moments of human existence - not causing them to afflict us, but sitting alongside us, and whispering to us, “I know what you’re going through, because I’ve been there too.” It’s a theological story that brings God closer.

At his son’s funeral, Nicholas Wolterstorff remembers that a rabbi friend of his read from the Hebrew Bible. After the service, the rabbi said to him “that what he had witnessed [during the funeral] was the endurance of faith. He was right,” says Wolterstorff. “My faith endured. But it would become a different kind of faith, a faith that incorporated Eric’s death and my grief. And that would reveal to me a different kind of God, [closer and] more mysterious. My relationship with my fellow human beings also changed,” he says. “I felt an emotional affinity, often unspoken, with those whom I knew were also in grief.” “Lament had been a minor part of my religious life,” he says. “[But] now, in this dark place, I found myself

drawn to the psalms of lament [Psalms like Psalm 22, and to the story of Christ's Passion]. They spoke to me," he says. "Or rather, they spoke *for* me. Their words became my words."

Good Friday is the darkest day on the church calendar. But it tells a story - a story of a God who is not untouched by life's darkest valleys. It tells a story of a God who instead entered into the very worst of human pain, experienced it, grieved it, wept over it - a God who sits beside hospital beds and car wrecks, enters into homeless shelters and refugee tents, a God who knows betrayal and denial and shame and loneliness. But it's also a story of a God who can turn life's crosses into empty tombs. Amen.