

Pilgrim Congregational Church,
AUGUST 20, 2023
SERVICE OF WORSHIP

PRELUDE

Prelude & Fugue in B—Johann Sebastian Bach

WELCOME, AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

We honor the Biblical call to love one another as God first loved us. We welcome into the full life and ministry of the church all people of any race, nationality, religious background, educational background, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, economic status, and physical, mental, and emotional abilities. You are welcome here.

Welcome Pilgrim Friends on this beautiful summer morning.

Please join me in our call to worship.

*CALL TO WORSHIP

One: We have been called the salt of the earth.

All: Let us remain distinctive and salty.

One: We have been called the light of the world.

All: Let us shine brightly in the midst of pain and confusion.

One: We have been called a city set on a hill.

All: Let us lift our gates, lift our hearts, and lift our voices in the praise of God.

Amen.

Please join in singing our first hymn, In Every Bulb There Is A Flower, #433.

Pilgrim Friends, will you pray with me.

CALL TO PRAYER

One: Christ is with us.

All: Christ is in our midst.

One: Let us pray.

UNISON PRAYER OF INVOCATION God, Father and Mother of us all, we adore you, whose name is love. We, your children, ask your blessing, for your nature is compassion, your presence joy. Your Word is truth, your Spirit goodness. Your holiness is beauty, your will is peace. Your service is perfect freedom, and we thank you for it all. Amen.

THE LORD'S PRAYER Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

SCRIPTURE

Our scripture readings today comes from Luke and John; and they features glimpses of the parent-child relationship through Mary.

We start with part of the Christmas story in Luke Chapter 2, verses 15-19

"15. When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' 16. So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child. 18. And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19. But Mary treasured these words and pondered them in her heart."

Then moving on through Luke Chapter 2 to verses 41-52

"41. Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. 42. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. 43. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. 44. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. 45. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. 46. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. 48. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him 'Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.' 49. He said to them, 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' 50. But they did not understand what he said to them. 51. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. 52. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor."

And, last, John Chapter 19 verse 25, "Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Madgalene."

Herein ends the reading.

Thanks be to God.

MEDITATION

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable unto you, our God, our Redeemer. Amen.

Date: August 19, 2023

Subject: Meditation

What I've Learned About Christianity from my Children

Part 1
Julia's Pearl

Good morning, Pilgrim Friends. So good to see you.

As you can tell from today's scripture it's Christmas AND Easter in August. We're gonna pack a lot in today.

Today's meditation emerged from a question Sadhna asked me over two years ago. Sometime during the Lenten season of 2021 she asked me, "Susan, how do you talk to your kids about Easter? There's lots of tough stuff in the Easter story: how do you handle it?"

In response to this very reasonable question I answered, "Sadhna: I **don't** talk to my kids about Easter. Easter is one of the **many** difficult and awkward topics I am **very** glad to delegate to Massachusetts public schools to teach my kids. I am **sure** there is an outstanding committee of experts in the Massachusetts Department of Education and whatever they have come up with for the 7th grade world religion curriculum is **fine** (and it gets me off the hook)."

You see, we **LOVE** Christmas at our house. We savor it for months. In fact, our Christmas lights are still up on our back deck. Easter, on the other hand ... we gallop through as fast as we can, and we **never** talk about it.

But, Sadhna's question stayed with me. And, after more than two years of meditating on this, a few things have come to mind that I suspect are not part of the Massachusetts 7th grade world religion curriculum.

Now, remember, I'm a professor: so taking two years and 6 months to answer a question is actually lightning-fast by academic standards. And, in true academic fashion, as I reflected on the question Sadhna asked me – how do I talk to my kids about Easter – I realized I still don't have an answer for that question, because we don't talk about Easter at our house. So, I'm going to change the question to one that I can answer (as professors do). And that question is: what have I learned about Christianity through my children? Now, I have the start of an answer to the revised question. Part 1 of which starts with Easter and starts with Julia **Pearl**, and Julia's **pearls** of wisdom that she has agreed to let me share with you.

Madeleine Anne and Eleanor Grace – stories about you will appear in future meditations, with your permission, of course.

It is through Julia that I have come to appreciate more fully the **problems** with the idea of substitutionary atonement—the payment model of salvation—that appears in lot of common Easter-interpretations. That's where we're headed today. But, before we get there, let's start with Mary and the things she keeps in her heart.

I appreciate that the Bible makes no mention of Mary keeping a baby-book for Jesus, one with momentos, his baby teeth, locks of hair from his first haircut -- because I have no baby-books for any of my kids. I am full of good intentions, but I have never managed to put one together. But, I love it that the Bible speaks multiple times to the things Mary keeps in her heart: the treasures that transform her heart.

In that Christmas passage we heard a moment ago, we feel a heart transformed by love. And, this passage invites me to think about how my heart has been transformed by love thanks to my children. All of them. But, today Julia's on deck.

My heart has been transformed by the wonder of childhood. When breezes would blow on Julia's face when she was a toddler, she would call them "wind kisses" -- and I now, forever, think of myself as kissed by the wind when I feel a breeze.

My heart has been transformed by joy. Embedded in my mother's heart is the din of laughter that fills our house when Julia is home and Julia is in charge. She is our family cruise-ship director, the person who organizes and implements our family fun. Whether it is badminton in the yard, or card games, or painting rocks, the laughter she generates resonates in my soul.

My heart has been transformed by beauty. From her earliest days, Julia's "crafts" have looked like things I might buy at a museum store. She has an eye and a talent for transforming the everyday into the extraordinary, with her paint brush, with her crochet needles, with her artists eye. She fills my heart with color.

But, life is not all wind kisses, and laughter, and beautiful canvases.

Our second scripture reading marks a pivot point, as Jesus starts making his transition into his ministry, and his mother needs to start her journey of **letting go** -- a journey that takes us to the painful Easter season.

Let's go back to Sadhna's question and my rephrase -- what do I want my kids to know about Easter and what have I learned about Christianity through my kids. And, let me set the stage for what was going on at our house during Lent of 2021, the COVID isolation year, around the time Sadhna posed her thoughtful question.

In a nutshell: **we were a hot mess**. We were all variations on a hot mess. But, the combination of COVID isolation with Junior Year of high school stress was an especially toxic combination for Julia. Things got **dark**. And things got **scary**.

And, in the **depths** of one of those dark and scary nights, Julia and I found ourselves on the bathroom floor crying at each other at 2 o'clock in the morning. I have no idea why we were crying on that particular night, or what we were crying about or what even led us to the

bathroom floor at 2am. These were **not** angry cries. These were primal cries of fear, about whether the sun would rise the next day, about whether there would be a morning.

And then, through the crying, I finally heard her. I finally heard her say, "Mom, stop. Stop making my pain be about you. Let my pain be **MY** pain."

When I finally heard her, I realized Julia was graciously **letting me off the hook**. I was assuming I was all **powerful** and I was the source of her pain. I was beating myself up for the pain she felt. Julia said, stop Mom. Her pain was **not** because I didn't homeschool her, or because I let her take BC pre-calc during the COVID year or I because I didn't make her eat more protein. Her pain was **HER** human pain.

Let's go to the cross with this one.

When I finally heard her, I imagined Mary at the cross on Good Friday. And, I imagined Mary beating herself up – what could I have done differently? 'Why did I send Jesus to the Montessori preschool at the Temple: he obviously needed more structure!' Or, 'Why did I let him spend time with his cousin John. Everything was fine until I let him hang out with cousin John. That John-the-baptist in nothing but trouble. What could I have done to **prevent** this unspeakable pain my child now faces. What did I do to **cause** the pain my child now faces.'" These are age-old parent questions.

And, I imagine Jesus saying to Mary, "Stop mom. Let my pain be MY pain. There is nothing you could have done."

But, now let's take it up a notch. I then imagined Jesus saying Julia's phrase to God. "This isn't about you, **Dad** and **your** plan. Let my pain be **MY** pain. I am fully human, and all that that entails."

Stay with me here for a moment, while Professor Moffitt takes a circuitous route to a point.

Substitutionary atonement is (in part) the idea that God **sent** Jesus into the world **in order to die** on the cross. This is sometimes called the **payment** model of salvation -- and this is one of the ways Easter gets tough to talk about with our kids. What kind of parent – what kind of God – lets a child suffer like that? Did God just let it happen? Did God make it happen?

Now, substitutionary atonement is **NOT** the interpretation of Easter that we hear from Rev. Reebee or from Sarah in church school: the kids have probably heard Rev Reebee and Sarah say tell us that Jesus did not die for us but instead that he **LIVES** for us. I also heard a rejection of this **payment** view of Easter in Julia's wisdom on that bathroom floor years ago. To these difficult Easter questions I heard Julia say, "let's take the parent out of the pain for a moment." I also heard Julia say, "let's take the **divine** out of the pain for a moment and let's make the pain be about humans being human."

Marcus Borg helps me unpack Julia's wisdom a bit in **his critique** of the idea of substitutionary atonement, the idea that Jesus was a "payment" for us, that Jesus died for us, that God sacrificed his son for us. In his book *Convictions*, Borg describes the **human power dynamics** going on at the time Jesus lived that led up to Jesus dying on Good Friday. Borg explains Jesus's death as a political act. He writes (and I quote),

"Jesus didn't just die. He was executed by the powers that ruled his world – a combination of Roman imperial authority and collaboration by high-ranking temple authorities. Together, they were the **domination** system of the time. They killed him because, in the name of the Kingdom of God, he challenged how they had put the world together – and he was beginning to attract a following. His mode of execution ... was reserved for those who **systematically** defied imperial authority ... Within this historical framework, his death was the domination system's **"No"** to Jesus and what he was passionate about."

In other words, one way to see this is that Good Friday, Jesus's death, is about the **humans** and human pain. But, let's bring the parent back in on Easter morning.

Borg continues, "Jesus's resurrection is God's "Yes" to Jesus and what Jesus was passionate about – the Kingdom of God [heaven on earth] – and God's "No" to the powers of domination that killed Jesus." Borg continues by focusing on the human role in Good Friday, "The cross has a political meaning that the **payment understanding** [the idea that Jesus died to pay for our sins] completely misses."

Enter Julia's wisdom: that pain is not about God's will, or a parent sacrificing a child, or even a parent screwing up (which we parents all do). Pain comes from being human and living in a human world. And, in Jesus's case, pain comes from **doing the right thing**.

Back to Sadhna's original question and my rephrase, how do I want to talk about Easter with my kids: I have learned at least 3 things from Julia about the Easter story:

- One, I'm so sorry to say, is that being human means knowing pain. Physical pain. Emotional pain. Spiritual pain. We are sentient beings. We feel. Sometimes this pain comes from standing up for what is right. Sometimes the pain comes from domination systems. Sometimes the pain comes from bad luck. Humans feel pain.
- And, two, no matter what, you will **not** face pain alone. In our unthinkable human pain, we are not alone. Whether it's the metaphor of mother Mary at the cross, or Lisa Boehm's note in your mailbox, or Ed Bond's will timed joke that reminds you how to laugh, or Bob Beckwith's chocolate that he slips into your pocket on Sunday morning, or mom on the bathroom floor with you at 2 o'clock in the morning, your earth family, your **church** family, your heavenly family will be with you – always. This is our promise, our covenant, to **all** the children of Pilgrim. This is the covenant we make with each other.

- And three, no matter what, no matter how dark things get, **hang on**: the sun **will** rise, the light **will** shine, morning **will** come – in **this** life, on **this** earth. **This** is the **God** part of the Easter story, this is God’s “**Yes**” to Jesus and all that Jesus represents. This is **God’s hope-filled covenant** with us.

So what happens when we let go of the “payment” model Easter, the “payment” model of substitutionary atonement, when we let humans be humans? In Borg’s words, “Good Friday and Easter are about personal transformation and God’s and Jesus’s passion for the transformation of this world.” It’s about the transformation of pain into the pearl – the Julia Pearl.

Amen

Pilgrim Friends, let us move into a time of prayer. Let us start with joy that you would like to lift up.

And, let us lift up our concerns:

We pray for Anne (Cowan) *(If folks ask more: She is on hospice but is stable enough to very much appreciate cards and the occasional visit arranged with her daughter Christina.)*

Prayers for Fran (Nickerson) who has moved to a new unit within Brookhaven.

Prayers for a Pilgrim dealing with a mental health challenge.

Prayers for a smooth process for the replacement of the roof and ongoing work toward solar, with appreciation for Dave (especially key to the roof process), Duncan and Susan for hands on coordination of this effort.

Please join me in prayer

CALL TO PRAYER

One: God be with you.

All: And also with you.

One: Let us pray.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Mother-Father God, thank you for making us daughters and sons, coheirs with Christ, sisters and brothers of one another, bearing witness with the Spirit that we are the children of God. We pray for the whole church, that in the field of this world, it may be the good seed that grows into your harvest. We pray for your whole creation that is waiting in eager longing to be set free from everything that holds it in bondage. We pray for earth’s people, its nations and

leaders, that all may come to know the ways that lead to peace. We pray for those who are ill and for those who are facing death, that they may find hope in the faith that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory to be revealed to them. We pray for those we know and love, that they may see the bond between them and you and that, wherever they go, you are with them.

We pray for Anne in hospice. We hold Fran close during her move. We pray for and hold close all Pilgrims dealing with mental health challenges.

We pray for a smooth process for the replacement of the roof and ongoing work toward solar, with appreciation for Dave (especially key to the roof process), Duncan and Susan for hands on coordination of this effort. We are grateful.

Blessed are you, eternal Presence, who, with Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, lead us to life everlasting.

Amen.

And, now let us move into a time of offering

OFFERING MUSICAL OFFERTORY Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee—arr. Becki Slagle Mayo

*DOXOLOGY Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Praise Him all creatures here below. Praise Him above, ye heavenly host; Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. or Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Praise God all creatures here below. Praise God above, ye heavenly host; Creator, Christ, and Holy Ghost.

*PRAYER OF DEDICATION

We thank you, God, for all of your blessings. May we use these gifts to serve you and your Way. Amen,

*HYMN Precious Lord, Take My Hand—Black Hymnal 472
Our final hymn is Precious Lord, #472 in the hymnal

Please join me in the benediction

*UNISON BENEDICTION

Let us go and join Christ in the world, healing and speaking words of freedom, witnessing to the sacred in the midst of life, and rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*CLOSING RESPONSE

Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.