



ALL SAINTS CHURCH

PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

**Tenebrae**

A meditation by Anne Breck Peterson

April 2, 2010

*God of mystery, known and beyond all knowing, draw near to us in the darkness. Be with us tonight in our sadness, in our grief. Surround us with a sense of your presence. Comfort us; uphold us. Help us to be. Amen.*

Tonight we find ourselves here again, in the dark. For some of us this is the first time at this service; for others the 30<sup>th</sup> time. Even if we have not been in this particular building at this particular time for this particular service, we have, nonetheless, been in this dark place before.

Earlier today the lights went out. The vigil at the foot of the cross ended this afternoon. Our friend and fearless leader, Jesus, is dead. We have lost someone who was close to us, a person who knew us best and loved us still, a person on whom we relied. This person was the source of vision, comfort, energy, and pizzazz. All hope has been extinguished. The center has been ripped from our being. We have inadvertently fallen from a great height and are now in free-fall. We are disoriented, paralyzed, numb. And we know we will never be the same again.

Year after year, we experience the journey from Ash Wednesday, through Lent to Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday. If we have been involved in the Christian tradition for any number of years, we have made the same journey over and over again. And, each year, although the lessons and the songs and the prayers are the same, our experiences are different—because each of us is in a different place from where we were last year. Last year, you may have given comfort to someone close to you who had suffered a great loss. This year, you may need comfort from others in your own loss and grief.

This year I have been on a journey. I wanted to make the stories of my faith real. I wanted to see the stories of scripture with fresh eyes. Who would this Jesus be to someone who had lived alongside of him and who along the way didn't know what would happen from moment to moment? All the New Testament was written after the death of Jesus and after the experiences of his continuing presence as described by his followers. The view back after the resurrection experiences sees Jesus as the son of God—which is not the way people saw him who lived with him day by day. I began an excavation, first with my trowel and then my pick ax to chip away at the layers of retroactive sacred veneer that had accumulated in my brain—and in the gospels.

I received a gift on this journey, in the form of a gifted director of theater and a small group of parishioners who came together to discover how to illuminate the story of Jesus' journey toward death and crucifixion at the Palm Sunday morning services. Over a period of six weeks, this director helped us to identify personally with this story. His vision was that we were people who had been present at the crucifixion and who decided for some reason to return to the scene years later. When we arrived at the place, each of us found strangers who had also come back. As one of them voiced a recollection, each of us then began to chime in and recall our own memories. Together we recreated among us what had happened.

Generally speaking, for most of my life I have successfully lived in my head. Emotionally, I turn toward the light, the hopeful, the positive. My response to something unforeseen is coping and solving. Hit by a car while crossing the street? Okay, now what do I need to be doing in order to make my life work? When my beloved father died, I cried. But it took me months to get in touch with how deeply my entire being was grieving that loss. With skill and a variety of exercises, our Palm Sunday director lured me, physically and emotionally, into the story's heart. In our dress rehearsal the day before, in the empty church, we were to imagine someone we had known in our own lives who had made the journey to death. I visualized so many people in this parish I had loved who are now gone. One by one, I saw where each of them had sat Sunday after Sunday, and I was overcome by tears.

This process made Jesus real for me. As we worked and reworked and imagined the story, I began to feel I knew that man. He was not half-human/half-divine; not the son of God; not the third person of the Trinity. He was a man. He was my friend—with gifts of healing; a gifted speaker with startling turns of phrase that captured my imagination. I could see that he had rooted himself in the Spirit and that he listened for the Spirit of God in his life—which seemed to make him fearless. He could be funny, outrageous, amazing, spontaneous, weird. He believed passionately in living life in a new way. And he made me believe in that possibility. The moment the gospel said, "And Jesus breathed his last breath," I was not observing the story; I was in it. And I was weeping.

The service tonight is the most counter-cultural one we have at All Saints. There is nothing to do—no communion to walk up for; no need to greet those around you. The only thing for us to do is to sit and be present to the psalms and the music.

So many people in disarray go to the psalms. One does not need a lot of biblical exegesis to understand the psalms. They span the emotions of human experience—and the emotions are clear and raw and all over the map. Last month, the president of Union Seminary, Serene Jones, spoke here about her own experience of trauma and the feeling that she had lost her faith. She said she had made her way back through yoga and the psalms. In the New York Times last Sunday, Dominique Browning, former editor of House and Garden magazine, lost her job when the magazine closed down. She says, "Being unemployed meant being unoccupied, literally. I felt hollow." It was a long way back for her, and, says, she started with the psalms, "whose gorgeous, intricate, sensual prayers blanketed me in wonder. There I found the most eloquent expression of grief I ever read: 'I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint: my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels.'"

The psalms are trustworthy in a crisis. The psalms are trustworthy because they do not sugar-coat anything. And they don't say stupid things to you like, "This too shall pass," or "Time heals all wounds," or "You must accept God's will for your life." The psalms are trustworthy because they acknowledge the violence in our lives. And by helping us to voice our raging anger and our deepest despair, they help us begin to reconnect to everyday life.

We know the story does not end with tonight. But it is important tonight to pretend that it does. In this way we will experience what the followers of Jesus felt. We will be in the moment. And the story will be poignantly fresh.