

“Again, in spite of that, we call this Friday good.”

The seventh in a series of seven sermons for the season of Lent

[“Again, in spite of that, we call this Friday good.” T. S. Eliot, “East Coker.” From the second of his *Four Quartets*.]

In 1939 the US began the top-secret Manhattan Project to develop an atomic bomb. In 1942 Manhattan Project chemists at the University of Chicago, under the leadership of Enrico Fermi, set up a makeshift laboratory under the Stagg Field stadium. One of the things they did was take two pieces of plutonium and mechanically, by hand with a Geiger counter, bring them together to see what would happen, to see the Geiger counter increase, to see how close they could get before something big happened. It was called “twisting the tail of the dragon.” Would it blow up the stadium? Chicago? Or a chain reaction which would blow up everything? The thrill of being right on the edge makes life meaningful and exciting. What is implied is that life itself is otherwise mundane, boring, and meaningless.

Good Friday is the right time to face this judgment that life is meaningless. It is a major theme in literature, theater, art, and science. Not just now but going way back. Consider for a few minutes how dominate is the message of meaninglessness:

In 1796 a German writer, Jean Paul, wrote a widely discussed story in which he went to heaven, met Jesus, and Jesus said, “It is a joke. There is no God, no salvation. There is nothing.”

In 1849 Henry David Thoreau wrote: “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” Not a few, but “the mass of men.”

In the 1920’s Franz Kafka wrote *The Trial* and *The Castle* about meaninglessness and how people live lives of turning the crank in mechanized bureaucracies.

In 1925 T.S. Eliot wrote the poem, *The Hollow Men*, which has the well-known line: “This is the way the world ends Not with a bang but with a whimper.”

In 1943 the French writer, Jean Paul Sarte, wrote a play called *The Trial*. Two people are trapped in a room. Then there’s a third and a fourth one. They spend days together in this room, trapped together. Sarte writes: “Hell is other people.” He also

wrote a play called *The Chips are Down* based on the gambling game roulette. When the chips are down, the play is set. The way that drama goes is that this person says after he died: "I didn't have a fair chance." He gets a chance to live it over, but it all ends the same way. Everything is set. Nothing changes.

After WW II a movement arose called *The Theater of the Absurd*, which expressed the feeling of many that life was hopeless and empty.

In 1953 Samuel Beckett wrote *Waiting for Godot*. The play is about two people who are waiting for God (Godot). When is God going to come? It keeps being said that God will come later, tomorrow. In the meantime they have nothing to do but kill time. There are a few other characters who wander in. Very specifically in the play it refers to two thieves on the cross from the Passion story. To the tree which could either be that tree which is the cross or the tree of life. But the point of the whole thing is that God never comes. Nothing ever goes anywhere. It's all meaningless, and that's all there is.

In 1964 the film *On the Beach* was released. It portrayed "life" after WW III. The story is set in Australia. A few people still alive there receive a telegraphic signal coming from the United States, and they wonder: "Is someone there?" But it turns out that the signal was coming from an empty house in Lawrence, Kansas. A window shade knocking a Coke bottle that taps the telegraph key and produces nonsense.

Steven Weinberg, the Nobel prize-winning physicist and writer who died in 2021, was famous for his terse judgments such as: "Physics shows the chilling impersonality of the universe." And: "The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it seems pointless."

Enough already! We get the point. Renowned scientists, literary luminaries, prolific playwrights have laid the charge that life is meaningless.

What do we Christians say to all this?

Several years ago archeologists digging around Rome in the catacombs found a graffito of a picture of a donkey crucified on the cross. The intelligentsia of that time, like the anti-Christian Celsus (Third Century), were mocking Christians for their "foolishness."

In the eyes of the world, the cross is foolishness. It is totally senseless. It is counter-intuitive. It is against all of our thinking.

For this reason it's appropriate when Good Friday lands on April 1st because Good Friday is really a corruption of saying "God's Friday."

What happened on God's Friday is that the Evil One, that trickster, that destroyer who makes everything absurd, that one who says life is meaningless, he himself was tricked, fooled, and destroyed.

Paul writes in 1 Cor 2:8: "None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." The Evil One was tricked. He was fooled. And he is destroyed.

There is a custom in some places for people to dress up in clown costumes on Good Friday as a way of laughing at the Evil One who was destroyed that day.

We are reminded of Paul's words in 1 Cor 1:22-24:

"Jews seek miracles; Greeks seek wisdom; we preach Christ crucified, a scandal to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men."

And as goes on a few verses later (1 Cor 1: 27-29):

"God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God."

Because the answer is: Against all of our wisdom and all of our ideas about miracles and about how the universe should be run, what he did on the cross made everything different.

"It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, which the sun's light failed, and the curtain of the temple was torn in two" (Luke 23:44-45).

Into our darkness, into the seeming meaninglessness of this world, the Lord has come to die on the cross to reach us, redeem us, and raise us.

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5).