

Stay

John 18:1-19:42

Fight or Flight. It's the most basic human response to great stress and danger. These two choices are hardwired into our biology. Fight or Flight. As Christ was fully human, as well as fully divine, it would make sense that biologically Jesus would have bound between these two responses.

Fight? Take on Rome and the Religious Authorities. Bring about violent revolution to seat himself as King over his Kingdom in this world. By worldly standards that would make sense. Even if Jesus didn't resort to violence, he could use words to fight. He *is The Word*. He could offer answers, outsmart his captors, turn the tables on them like he'd done so many times before. Jesus could talk his way out of crucifixion. It would make sense to fight.

Or Flight? Run away, far away. Take his message personally to India and the east. He could run back to Egypt like his family did when there was danger in the days after he was born and Herod sought to kill him then. He was so afraid that he cried out to his father in the garden, so yeah, it would make sense to run.

Fight or Flight. The most human responses. And Jesus was fully human, fully divine. Fight or Flight.

Instead he chose a third way. He showed the world a third path in the face of systems of sin, injustice, fear, and death. He showed God's people what God's path would be in response to our violent justice.

He chooses to STAY.

It takes a seemingly irrational response to deny our human biology. Fight or Flight, overcome by the call to STAY. This Good Friday story takes new meaning for us today, as we are being called upon by leaders, by neighbors, by friends and strangers, to *stay* where we are. Staying isn't the glorious or easy option. It's lonely, forsaken, devoid of friends, bereft of hope, and terrifying. Too much of this story feels familiar this year. Healthcare workers and essential staff may connect too well Peter's utter terror, out in the open, around others, with the shadow of death hanging over his every move, terrified for himself and his friends should death recognize him... all the while wrestling with his desire to fight and his call to care, follow, and serve. Family members may weep with Mary in her helplessness as she watches death consume her beloved son, while she is helpless to even touch or comfort him in his final hours. Business owners and communities may hear the disciple's confusion and fear as their way of life crumbles around them in a new way as we wonder what normal could possibly look like after all of this. Each of us who face a global pandemic may be witnessing to the loneliness, the God-forsakenness, the frustration, fear, and humiliation of this story with new eyes today.

Good Friday, for so many, may simply be too real, too present, too familiar this year. And in our hearts rises that most basic human reaction: gathering ourselves for a defiant fight against this troubled time, or desperately seeking some way to run, deny, evade, distract, and take flight from the reality of death that is around us. Yet in this story of forsaken suffering, Christ chose to stay.

It takes faith to stay.... It takes love to stay.... We cannot manufacture this faith and love, it is a gift of God, a fruit of the tree of life that is the Cross of Christ. This is what God has done for us on Good Friday. God chose to Stay in the place of pain and forsakenness. God chose to dwell in the place of death.

No, we're not going to rush to Easter. Tonight is not a night to discuss victory. Tonight is a night to practice the life-giving act of staying in defeat. Too often, it is our human tendency to rush past stress, danger, and death. We offer our fight responses to pain in our world, babbling out answers, offering meaningless platitudes, trying to make everything ok. We offer our flight responses to pain in our world, running away from our pain and the pain of others, meeting suffering with cold indifference, trying to rush to joy and Easter, pretending everything is ok.

God doesn't do that. God chooses to stay.

When we suffer, when our neighbor suffers, when the pain of Good Friday plays out in our world every day, God chooses again and again to stay. The shadow of the cross looms large over our world, even as we wish to rush to happy endings, light and joy, and God chooses to stay. With the oppressed, on the margins, in the midst of injustice, God chooses to stay. With the sick and the weary, with all who desperately struggle to care for them, God chooses to stay.

We're called to do the same, as disciples of the Crucified God. But to stay denies our innermost human nature for fight or flight. To stay we need strength that is not our own, faith that is not our own, love that is not our own. We're meant, in the forsaken deathly days of our life, to rely on God who is already there, staying in love and faith. This call to stay at the foot of the cross with those who are suffering, meeting them in faith and love, is so outside our human ways. We can't do it apart from God.

There's nothing we can say to fill the emptiness of this night. Yet. For now, we can *stay*, and we can pray for those who know this pain daily, who bear the marks of rejection and forsakenness on their body, mind, and spirit.

But first, let us stay with the pain, that we might stay with those in pain, that we might know God's presence in our pain.

Only the crucified God can bring new life to what is dead.

Only the crucified God can teach us how to Stay.