

Good Friday | April 3, 2026

Strong-hearted friends: Why would we, a group of Christians who profess a progressive, ever-evolving faith in a God of love and justice, choose to gather on this solemn evening in the circle of the church year?

In the church of my childhood, I understood that we gathered to be reminded of our enduring guilt – not so much for the harm we may have done or the good we may have failed to do toward our neighbor and ourselves, but rather our enduring guilt for the circumstances of Jesus' death 2,000 years ago. In retrospect, I see where those words of guilt landed as shame. If we were born sinful and trapped in sinfulness from which only Jesus could redeem us, yet we were also guilty over and over again for his death, the only option seemed to be to feel terrible about ourselves through and through. This kind of theology has inflicted significant spiritual trauma on many throughout time and still does so today.

This pattern of thinking hinges on the concept of **substitutionary atonement**. I feel it is important to note and name how some of our faith ancestors created a God who is very much like us humans at our worst (jealous, resentful, spiteful, calculating, and controlling). Substitutionary atonement is an idea squeezed (event wrung) out of the Epistles – those New Testament letters written by disciples of Jesus in the decades following his death and resurrection appearances. According to substitutionary atonement, a very human-like God hatched a plan for Jesus to suffer, die and rise in such a way that his experience would pay the price demanded by a grudge-bearing God for all sins the rest of us commit across all of time. In other words, many place their trust in a God of punishment and release. Punishment and release sounds very human.

I quote Rev. Dr. Mark Sandlin from time to time in our worship services. Sandlin recently shared this thought on social media: *“Redemptive suffering is ghastly theology. Seldom is suffering redemptive and if it were, surely all humanity would be redeemed by now.”*

Can we find good news on this Good Friday? What if God was never a divine dictator, seeking payment for the suffering humans inflict upon one another?

What if, instead, God is love? That is the God in whom I trust – a steadfast loving energy that is powerful beyond our imagination and certainly beyond our intellection. I sense that is also the God in whom Jesus trusted. And that is the God whom we welcome into our hearts and lives. That steadfast love is the God to whom we open our hearts, weep with all our senses, and sing from the depths of our souls this evening.

We don't rely on a God who plans, causes, or allows our suffering and the suffering of our neighbor. Because God does not fit within the narrow confines of our human behavioral tendencies.

Instead, **God abides with us** through all our suffering – even as God abided with Jesus through his suffering.

We gather this evening because we trust God to indwell us with abiding love that continues to work toward mitigation of suffering and uplift of our human condition.

May we continue to gather in that spirit of God with us in suffering, because the resurrection of life is counting on us. Amen.