

Good Friday Tenebrae 2026: "You Are Loved"
April 3, 2026
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Despite the cold, wet weather this morning, Good Morning, Good Friday seemed especially joyful. John Theodor was back after his back surgery, bringing this year's shipment of especially soft tee shirts, in lovely lavender, with Luther's Rose superimposed on the back, surrounded by the words, "You Are Loved! We Love Because He First Loved Us, 1 John 4:19." (After we read that in unison, one of the kids asked, "Who's John?" -- one of the morning's many teachable moments ☺.) We're certainly not afraid to repeat ourselves. The overriding message for the children and youth is always the same: "Jesus says, 'I love you this much.'"

We've been hosting Good Morning, Good Friday for 29 years here at Holy Trinity. The children who once participated now bring their children. The mothers who once brought their own kids now bring their grandkids. It's a beautiful thing. It fills me with hope that our faith will have children. This year we welcomed children from Atonement Lutheran in Asbury Park. We also had a couple families who came all the way from Staten Island. We more than double the average number of children and youth who participate in Sunday School, Pre-Confirmation and Confirmation. (If we could just keep them coming every week....)

I was really encouraged this year by the knowledge of the Passion story with which the kids **arrived**. I lead the Way of the Cross, the story-telling part of the morning. Our pre-schoolers have their own program; Jen Martin and I have the kindergarteners through 6th graders. Jen developed a time line using picture stickers as well as words, enabling the little ones to have fun and track the story, but also giving the older children a chance to shine, ask their questions, share their insights. One of our 5th graders wondered out loud if Judas really had a choice about betraying Jesus, if Judas really ended up in hell. I wished she could have been at our Wednesday

Bible study when an adult raised the same question. It was a very theological question to ask. We talked about Peter denying the Lord three times, and one of the children was puzzled that the accompanying sticker was a rooster. He said, "I was sure it was a **crow**," which puzzled me, until Jen cracked the code: "Oh, it's because we say the rooster **crowed**."

The Passion story seen through the eyes of a child.... We give them grape juice and pita bread when we talk about the Last Supper. We used to serve the grape juice in little plastic Communion cups, but small hands often knocked over those tiny cups, so now we pour the juice into bathroom sized Dixie cups. The story is no less sacred, but we've become a bit more practical. (Jesus is not against efficiency.) If they don't already know it, the children learn that Jesus took the bread and said, "This is my body," He took the cup and said, "This is my blood," and then He commanded, "Do this in remembrance of Me." Such things are mysterious and even mystical. Do **we** understand these mysteries all that much more than the children? I think **awe** is the holiest of all possible responses, regardless of our age.

Years ago I was telling the story to a much younger group and when I spoke of Calvary, the crucifixion and death, an incredulous, heartbroken preschooler said, "Jesus **died??**" All I could do was confirm that yes, He died, and then quickly share the good news of His resurrection. "Jesus **died??**" She didn't say it out loud, but the sadness in her voice said, "My Friend Jesus **died?** What am I to do??" I don't remember a time when I knew He died, but didn't also know He was raised. Do you?

We come tonight to acknowledge the incalculably precious gift of our Savior's life and death. We come to thank and worship our crucified Lord, recognizing that, as St. Paul wrote, we "have been bought with a price." (1 Corinthians 6:20) As we approach the cross we can say with Paul, "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me. I have been crucified with Christ. And

the life I now live I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.”

(Galatians 2:20)

“You Are Loved!” We need to hear that as much as the kids do. “We Love Because He First Loved Us” – another important reminder. How **much** did He love us? Well, He spread out His arms on the cross and said, “I love you **this** much.” Our adult understanding outpaces the kids’ in terms of our awareness of the sheer gamut of our sins, and what profound havoc is wreaked by our failures in love. Maybe as adults we can also identify closely with our Lord’s cry of desolation from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken Me?” It’s more likely, too, that we’ve felt the pain of **being** the betrayed or even of being the betrayer. If our guilt and shame are more pronounced than that of the children – may our gratitude for forgiveness be that much deeper. If it’s all the more incredible that Jesus should die for **us**, despite our **unworthiness**, may our depth of love be that much greater. As Jesus said of the woman whose sins He forgave: “She was forgiven much, so she loves much.” (Luke 7:47) We are forgiven much; let us love much.

The goal of Good Morning, Good Friday, is certainly to gather the children around the cross **and** to teach them the Way of the Cross, but it is also to make little evangelists out of them. They have taken their timelines home with them as a way to remember the story and to tell it to others. Before they left, Miss Danielle and I invited them to come to the rail, kneel and receive this commission: “You are loved; go and love.” I say to you all: “You are loved; go and love.” In the name of Jesus, our crucified and risen Lord. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham