

Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church

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Good Friday

April 10, 2009

What follows on these pages are the "Seven Last Words" of Christ as told in the Gospels and a meditation on each of those "words." At Good Shepherd Church, these words are spoken on Good Friday evening with the congregation gathered around a 100 candle lit floor cross in the chancel.

"In the Darkness"

WORD ONE

Matthew 27:45--52

45 From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.

46 And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

47 When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah."

48 At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink.

49 But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him."

50 Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.

51 At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split.

52 The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The precious words of the psalmist, ever on our lips, and even at this moment on the lips of our Lord. Hanging there, being murdered in devastating cruelty, the incarnate God cries out from the depths of his being with the words of the psalmist.

(Psalm 22:1,2) "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?"

"O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest."

Panting in pain, dripping with his own blood, and alone. Soul crying out. Forsaken. Forgotten. Lost. Forgotten. Deserted. Forgotten. Alone. Without God. This was hell. Forgotten and forsaken by God.

"My God, my God, where have you gone? Is this how you treat your Son?"

Utter loneliness. Bitter sting of body meeting with the all consuming coldness of death.

These words of loneliness are the only words Matthew has on the lips of the bloody Christ. They are words of isolation. They are words of separation. They are words we would never want to speak.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

But even here, in the darkness that is death---Jesus claims God as His own—"MY God, MY God....why?"

WORD TWO:

Luke 23:32-38

32 Two others also, who were criminals, were lead away to be put to death with him.

33 When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.

34 Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing.

35 And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!"

36 The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine,

37 and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"

38 There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."

This is Jesus. It is Jesus in the truest sense of the name. Here he is, nailed to a cross. He is suffering the worst suffering that the ancient world could come up with, and the words from his lips are words of forgiveness. How ironic.

These are words of unconditional love.

Jesus, the Holy Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, asks God to forgive us as we crucify him.

Jesus was a Pastor in the truest sense. He cared for his flock, the sheep. He tended them. He kept them in his care. Even at his last, his concern is the sheep.

"Oh God, forgive them, they know not what they do."

"All we like sheep have gone astray."

"Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing."

And the words of Jesus, echo to us through John, (10:7-11). "So again Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them.

"I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief come only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

Jesus. The good shepherd, laying down his life for the sheep."

"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

WORD THREE:

Luke 23:39-43

39 One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

40 But the other rebuked him, saying "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?"

41 And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong."

42 Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

43 He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

A criminal. A crook. A thief. A no good. This guy beside Jesus was scum of the earth. Below low class. Worthless. His life meant nothing. He never amounted to anything. He was a failure. He was a mis-guided, self-centered, bad person.

He didn't go to church. He didn't put anything in the offering plate. He didn't feed the hungry. He didn't liberate the oppressed. He didn't do anything for the poor. He didn't care about the thirsty. The sick weren't his problem.

He wasn't the kind of guy that you and I would call "friend," and we certainly wouldn't welcome him as "brother" or "sister." We would watch the silver when he's in our church building.

And its to one such as this that Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Hanging on his death bed, we have a conversion story to beat all here. "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Jesus, answers belief in his name, no matter how undesirable we are. No matter how un-Christian-like we look, no matter how bad we have been yesterday or this morning, Jesus answers us in the only way he knows how.

He answers us with life. Abundant and eternal life.

"For God so loved the world, that God have the only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

Everyone. That includes those who we would write-off as not worthy to receive the gift of union with God. Jesus calls all people to belief and share in the communion of God. That includes those who are strung out on drugs, those who steal our cars, and those who rape innocent women and children.

The gift of life is offered, through Jesus in the words to the thief on the cross. The gift of life is offered to those groups of people our world hates. To the racists, to the skin-heads, to the junkies, to gay men and lesbians, to drug lords, to prostitutes, to the poor, to the rich, to those with AIDS, to those who sell handguns,---to all Jesus dies that he might answer a call for remembrance with life.

Life for everyone. Even for us.

"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

WORD FOUR:

Luke 23:44-46

44 It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon,

45 while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two.

46 Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."
Having said this, he breathed his last.

"Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

Jesus, forsaken by God and cut off, waits there on the cross for the last breath. The pain so terrible, the suffering so great that his body has become numb. His nerves register such excruciating screams, that his body is unable to respond.

He is suspended in death. Yet even now, he clings not to the cross that holds him, but he clings to the relationship which holds the power of life and death.

God. At this moment there is nothing else.

God. And God alone.

Jesus offered himself up as the sacrifice for the sins of all. He came as God's only Begotten, the Son of God, and the Son of Humanity. That incarnation was now in the throws of death. The end had come.

In his feet, those precious feet which traveled up the to the place called The Skull--in those feet was death.

In his legs, his legs which walked upon the water, urging the longing disciples to look in faith, and there to find the truth that all things are possible. In those legs, there was death now.

In his arms, those arms which stretched out to embrace the children and welcome them as the kingdom of God. In those arms, there was only death now.

In those hands, those beautiful hands which clasped in constant prayer...those hands which had broken bread and lifted the cup to share a feast of remembrance. In those hands, the hands which had bent down to make mud that would be spread on the blind man's eyes--in those very hands, there was now death.

On those lips, the lips which proclaimed the kingdom of God, those lips which called for repentance, those lips which told parables about fathers and sons, about virgins, about farmers and landholders. On those lips there was now death.

In his body there was death, there on the cross. But there remained the Breath of God, the Spirit, the Ruach'----life that even death can not kill.

"Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit."

WORD FIVE:

John 19:25b-27

25b Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.

26 When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son."

27 Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

"Woman, here is your son."

"Here is your mother."

Crucifixion. Its horrible beyond belief. To watch a stranger died in any way is devastating. To watch another human die by crucifixion is beyond devastating. But, to watch your own Son die, crucified and condemned---there are not even words for that.

This death of the Christ, was a necessary part of the divine plan. Jesus was fully divine, and he was completely dedicated to God's plan. And Jesus was also fully human, and in his humanity he was completely dedicated to God's plan.

Jesus recognizes his mother from the cross, and that recognition is an indication of his full humanity. In his full humanity, he felt the depths of pain and suffering.

Those who loved him also felt his pain and his suffering. Imagine his mother, looking up there, seeing her precious little boy---no longer a boy, but now a man, bleeding and dying. The Jesus that she once held in her hands was now a bloody Jesus lifted up on a tree.

Jesus had concern for her feelings and loss. He told his close friend, "Here is your mother." He was giving the loved disciple and Mary a directive to comfort and support one another. Jesus was binding them together in their relationship through him.

We have been bound together as family to comfort, to support, to sooth, to care, and to love each other as the brothers and sisters of Jesus.

We are God's family, we are the relatives of the crucified Jesus. Connected and bound together by the humanity and divinity of the Messiah God. Brother. Sister. Cousin. Uncle. Aunt. Niece. Nephew. Related in Christ.

"Woman, here is your Son."

"Here is your mother."

WORD SIX:

John 19:28-29

28 After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), "I am thirsty."

29 A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth.

"I am thirsty."

"I am the bread of life. The one who comes to me will never be hungry. The one who believes in me will never thirst."

Jesus the provider of bread of life, the giver of thirst quenching water. Jesus, the one who stood there at the well with a woman of Samaria, and told her that he had a water which she could drink that would never make her thirst again.

And after supper, he took a cup saying, "This cup is the new covenant sealed in my blood for the forgiveness of sins." Do this in remembrance of me.

Now on the cross, dying. The spiritual thirst quencher calls out for physical drink. In his words are the fulfillment of Psalm 69:21 where it says, "They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink."

When Jesus said, "I am thirsty." Was he thirsty for water? for vinegar on a sponge? for new wine? Or was he talking about the kind of thirst that he spoke of throughout his ministry on earth?--- The thirst for God. For fulfillment in the spirit. For unity with the creator. For sustaining power.

When we thirst, is it water we really want? Will that quench our thirst?

"I am thirsty?"

WORD SEVEN:

John 19:30-37

30 When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

31 Since it was the day of Preparation, the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross during the Sabbath, especially because the Sabbath was a day of great solemnity. So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed.

32 Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him.

33 But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs.

34 Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out.

35 (He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth.)

36 These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled, "None of his bones shall be broken."

37 And again another passage of scripture says, "They will look on the one whom they have pierced."

"It is finished."

The last words of our Lord. His life was done. He could bear no more. The physical limits of his being had been met. Death was upon him---moving like the Passover spirit.

It consumed him, and in his dying breath, the final summation of his life---it is finished.

The plan of Salvation---done.

The new covenant. A right relationship with God.

Sin. Put down.

Sinfulness. Power destroyed.

Death. Battled in his bloody, lifeless, breathless body.

Jesus----dead.

[[[Silence]]]

"It is finished."