

Good Friday 2015

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On this Good Friday evening, I want to read two passages of Scripture to you, one from the Old Testament and one from the New. From the prophet Isaiah.

1 Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? 2 For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. 3 He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. 4 Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. 5 But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned--every one--to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. 7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. 8 By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? 9 And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit found in his mouth. 10 Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. 11 Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. 12 Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.

Now from John's Gospel, the story of our Lord's crucifixion.

16 ... So they took Jesus, 17 and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called The Place of a Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha. 18 There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them. 19 Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." 20 Many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek. 21 So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but rather, 'This man said, I am King of the Jews.'" 22 Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written." 23 When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his garments and divided them into four parts, one part for each soldier; also his tunic. But the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom, 24 so they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be." This [John writes] was to fulfill the Scripture which says, "They divided my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots." So the soldiers did these things, 25 but standing by 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 nearby, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" 27 Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home. 28 After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), "I thirst." 29 A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. 30 When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished," and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. 31 Since it was the day of Preparation, and so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they might be taken away. 32 So 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 But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. 35 He who saw it has borne witness--his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth--that you also may believe. 36 For these things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled: "Not one of his bones will be broken." 37 And again another Scripture says, "They will look on him whom they have pierced."

Our Father, this evening as we gather, a people who are both responsible for the death of our Lord and who have been rescued by that very death, we ask that we might both mourn over the sins that placed him on that cross and hold fast to the promises that they that mourn shall be comforted. Comfort your people that what Christ has accomplished for them fully satisfies your wrath against them. Your justice has been satisfied, your wrath has been turned away and they stand accepted in him and only in him. Father, may the sobriety of this evening, the death of our Lord, cause each and every one of us to

ponder what a magnificent display of love and grace you have shown us, that he who knew no sin might be made sin for us in order that we might be made the righteousness of God in him, and having received that full and free pardon, we worship you. May Christ who has been lifted up from the earth draw us to him and in him may we find a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Immanuel's veins, that sinners who are plunged within that blood, lose all their guilty stains. For it is in his name that we ask this. Amen.

5 ... God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. 6 If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. 7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. 8 If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

Most holy and merciful Father, we confess to you and to one another that we have sinned against you by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart and mind and strength. We have not fully loved our neighbors as ourselves. We have not always had in us the mind of Christ. You alone know how often we have grieved you by wasting your gifts, by wandering from your ways. Forgive us, we pray, most merciful Father, and free us from our sin. Renew us in the grace and strength of your Holy Spirit for the sake of Jesus Christ, your Son, our Savior. Amen.

Two thousand years of Christian history tell us that the Friday that Jesus was crucified should properly be called Good Friday. We view Friday with Sunday eyes and it is in the light of what takes place on Sunday morning that we can retroactively look backward and see what took place on Friday and say, "That is good." But it must not have seemed good to those who surrounded Jesus that day. I want to tell you three of their stories.

At the base of the cross, a woman stood looking up at the dying body of Jesus. She was surrounded by others who loved him, who were horrified and sickened by what they saw, who shared with her her grief, but in many ways she was alone in her experience. No one else could understand the depth of her grief. No one had experienced life with him as she had. No one could fully grasp the sorrow of a mother who must watch her son die.

As a young woman, Mary had borne the embarrassment and shame of a pregnancy out of wedlock. How would she explain the miraculous nature of his conception? What did those conversations sound like around the family dinner table? "Father, mother, I need to speak to you about something. What I'm going to tell you is going to seem like a fantasy. I know how preposterous this is going to seem to you, but I ask you to believe me even when your mind and heart tells you that I am lying." How long would it take before the whispers in the village that she lived in grew loud enough for her to hear? "Oh, she seemed like such a good girl. I can't imagine how her parents must feel, how awful that she would betray such a righteous man like Joseph." Those whispers eventually became loud enough that her parents sent her away.

As difficult as it was, she endured by faith and Joseph, to his credit, stood with her. And her cousin Elizabeth shared in her miraculous experience, pregnant in her old age, announced by that same angel.

Finally, after months of waiting, she gave birth to her firstborn son. In that moment, all of the shame and reproach that she had endured was replaced by joy. The presence of the angels and the shepherds and later the Magi, confirmed the prophecies about Jesus, her son. He was unique, the son of Mary and the Son of God. Immanuel, the longed for Messiah.

In many ways, the life of Jesus was normal. Like all other boys, he played and he worked and he enjoyed the life of a child who was lovingly nurtured by his family. He would have been trained to know the Torah and his mother, who we are told often pondered the prophecies about him, no doubt shared those things with him so that he might come to know in time that the hand of the Almighty rested on him in a way that made him different than everyone else around him.

And he was different. There were no angry outbursts, no petty childishness, no pouting. He was always much more mature than his friends. He was joyful and he was fun-loving but there was a sobriety about him as well.

At age 12, he had already mastered the Scriptures in a way that amazed theologians. Did they beg his parents to allow Jesus to live with them in Jerusalem so that they could prepare the next rabbinical prodigy? Would Mary and Joseph agree? We don't know for sure. The Scripture is silent on that. But regardless, she watched as he moved from childhood to adolescence and then he became a man.

This must have both confused her and worried her. He was loving and gentle and yet he began to withdraw. There were long periods of solitude and prayer. His eyes betrayed an increasing seriousness about this life and the next. There was an otherworldliness about him that must have been disconcerting to her.

Then his public ministry began. Most mothers would have seen the adoring crowds gathering around their son, listening to every word that he spoke, championing his cause, thrilled by his miracles, and were filled with pride, but I suspect Mary was different. She watched helplessly as his popularity grew to what she no doubt considered frightening levels knowing that the crowds would have drawn the attention of both the Jewish and Roman authorities. Elizabeth, her cousin's son, John, had been beheaded by Herod. Would her son be next?

Meanwhile, in her own home, among her own family, her children were beginning to have questions about their older brother. They actually began to believe that Jesus was showing signs of insanity. Once they tried to take him away for rest, but he refused to go.

From then on, she saw less and less of him as his preaching ministries took him deep into Judea. There were, of course, occasional visits and she cherished every one of them, but Jesus had a restlessness and too quickly he was gone yet again.

The one time of year that she could count on seeing him was in Jerusalem during Passover. Can you imagine how she looked forward to those trips and being reunited with her oldest child? But she knew that there would be danger. She had heard reports that the authorities were unhappy with him. She also knew that there was revolution in the air and a growing number of zealots were openly talking about revolting against Rome. Some of these, she knew, saw her son as their hope: a new Judas Maccabeus who could harness Jewish fervor, rally popular opinion, and give Israel hope for her freedom. The thought must have filled her heart with dread. Rome had proven time after time that she would crush any revolt and Mary must have worried that Jesus would have been caught up in this.

And of course, her worst fears were realized. Roman justice was swift. There were no long delays as an accused waited for his defense attorney to prepare his case. There was no jury trial, no appellate courts. Once the governor passed sentence, the criminal was executed immediately.

So Mary found herself on Friday at the foot of a Roman cross and watched as her son, bruised and bleeding, gasping for breath, clenching in anguish, was slowly but surely dying. She was looking at a sight that no mother should ever have to see.

In the midst of all of this, she catches his eye and for one last time he looks at her and she sees the same kind of kindness and care that he had always shown. He turns to his entrusted friend, John, and says to him, "Your mother." And he says to his mother, Mary, "From now on, this is your son." And then he dies.

When Jesus was eight days old, Mary and Joseph carried him to the Jerusalem Temple. An old man was waiting for them. As he looked down on this child, he prophesied that Jesus would be the cause for the rising and falling of many in Jerusalem. And then fixing his eyes on Mary, he sadly told her that a sword would pierce her heart as well. On Friday, a Roman soldier took his sword out and pierced the side of Jesus, and in doing so, opened a gaping hole in Mary's heart. There was nothing about this Friday that seemed good to her.

He was an angry young man. He probably wasn't always that way. Like Jesus, he had once been someone's child. Like most children free from the weight of a cruel world, he had lived carefree, chasing butterflies, lying under a blue sky, and dreaming about a wonderful life that rolled out in front of him. But something changed him, probably something terrible that ruptured his life and sent him on a path that would lead him to an early grave. Maybe he witnessed an awful atrocity. Did a Roman soldier kill his parents? Did he watch a brother or a sister die at the hands of a centurion? We don't know but the little glimpse that we have of him on Friday tells us that his heart had been robbed of its

humanity and in its place was a deep-seated anger that led him to the life of a violent crime.

At some point in his life, he had probably joined a group of freedom fighters, at least that's the way they thought of themselves. The Romans saw them differently. They were insurrectionists. Guilty of treason. Violent. Dangerous. And the Romans didn't trifle with such people. They were determined to crush any sign of rebellion and that's why on this Friday he is hanging on a cross with two other men. One of those men he knew. They had killed Romans together. And while they were not really friends, they did share a common bond, a belief that they were serving the cause of their nation even if that leadership of that nation, compromised by its associations with Rome, despised them as much as the Romans did.

Passover was a perfect time to do their deadly work. They could move in near anonymity among the tens of thousands of pilgrims that were there. All they had to do was move up closely behind a Roman, pull out a short knife, and stick it deep into his back in just the right place. By the time anyone knew what had happened, the crowded streets would conceal the criminal. They would get away, knowing that Israel was being liberated one dead Roman at a time. But history is a reminder that criminals are exposed. Somehow, their plans had been discovered. They were found out, arrested, tried, and found guilty. The wheels of Roman justice were grinding them into the ground.

By design, crucifixions were public spectacles. They were horrible, awful, large, Roman billboards that warned Jews that no one would escape Roman justice. If you tried to fight the Empire, the Empire would crush you publicly in the most humiliating way possible. And so this young criminal found himself looking down from a cross knowing that his life was soon ended.

Most likely, unlike Jesus, he had no mother or father there to comfort him, no wife to stand beneath him and look lovingly upon him in his dying moments. Most people in that moment would be pensive, fearful, thoughtful, even regretful, but not him. To the very end, he held onto his rebellion. He was jaded, angry and irreligious to the last breath, and even though he witnessed the divine signs of darkness and earthquake and he heard the cry of dereliction from the lips of the man next to him, he remained resolute in his defiance of Rome and Israel and God.

Rome would have the final word in his life. To hasten his death because of the coming Jewish Sabbath, a soldier, the kind that he despised so much, approached him, swung a heavy metal bar at his knees, and broke his legs. Unable to lift himself up to gain a breath, this criminal died the painful death of asphyxiation. For him, there was nothing good about this Friday.

It was a surreal moment for Lazarus. The man hanging on the middle cross was his friend. He and his sisters, Mary and Martha, had known him for a few years. Their home, in fact, had become a waystation for him and his followers whenever they came to Jerusalem. In fact, the past week, Jesus had journeyed daily from their home in Bethany

to teach in the Temple. Lazarus liked to think to himself that except for his 12 disciples and his family, that he and his sisters were probably the closest friends Jesus had in all of the world. If he could, he would have gladly changed places with him. After all, Lazarus had no fear of death now.

Weeks earlier, he had fallen ill. At first it seemed like an ordinary illness. He couldn't find the strength to get on his feet. It had happened before. There was nothing out of the ordinary about it this time, at least that's what he told himself, but he grew worse. His sisters did everything that they could to keep him comfortable but still his health declined.

He had a fever and it made him delirious. In moments of clarity, he could overhear Mary and Martha talking to their friends. He heard them say the name Jesus. Was he there? If so, he had no fear. His friend, Jesus, would touch him and all would be well. Maybe he dreamed of Jesus walking into the room, kneeling over his bed, saying his name. The hands that healed hundreds of others would most certainly heal him.

But it was just a dream. Jesus wasn't there. Lazarus had no way of knowing that his sisters had frantically sent word to Jesus that their brother, their dear brother, was deathly sick. They had no doubts that he would come immediately. After all, he had loved them as though they were his own family. They were younger than him, they had lost both of their parents, and he had become an older brother of sorts to them. Mary absolutely adored him. She would become almost giddy when she knew that he was coming. Martha was more reserved, less emotional, more practical, but she loved him deeply as well.

Days came and went. Messengers returned with the news that Jesus knew of Lazarus' sickness but still he didn't come. Hope that Mary and Martha had that was so certain, began to wane as their brother moved closer to death. Finally, it disappeared completely when Lazarus stopped breathing.

His body was soon prepared for burial, wrapped and perfumed and then sealed in a cold, dark tomb, separated forever from the sisters who loved him and Jesus who had failed him.

Then the darkness was pierced by light. His deaf ears once again heard noise. It was a cacophony of voices, some loud, some quiet. He heard sobbing and then he heard that voice, "Lazarus, get up! Come out! We're waiting for you." He was dazed and confused. Where was he? Why was Jesus telling him to get up? Why couldn't he see anything? Why were there linens wrapped around his face?

Then suddenly there were hands helping him, unwrapping the cloths. As his eyes adjusted to the light, he became conscious that he was not in his bedroom, he was outside in a cemetery. Mary and Martha were kissing him, saying something about a miracle. Jesus was smiling at him. The whole village was laughing and singing and praising Yahweh.

Lazarus learned the whole story of his death, burial and resurrection, over the next few hours. He had heard of this happening elsewhere but he found it difficult to comprehend that it had happened to him. There were the expected questions from his sisters and friends, "Where were you those four days? Were you conscious of your existence? What does paradise look like? You were in paradise, right?" But he couldn't answer any of them. It was like his memory of those days had been erased. All he knew, he had been sick, others had seen him die, he had been buried in a tomb for four days, and now, inexplicably, he was alive.

"You saved others, save yourself!" Those words bit deep into Lazarus' consciousness. Indeed, Jesus had saved him from the ultimate peril and now it was inconceivable what he was witnessing. His friend was slowly dying before his very eyes. Why? How could someone that had the ability to give life to others not sustain his own? For Lazarus, this Friday would see the man who had given him life lose his own and there was nothing good about that.

Why do we call this Friday good? And the answer is simple: it's because Sunday came and that changed everything. Sorrow was turned to joy. Tears were replaced by laughter. Doubt gave way to faith. Guilt was trumped by forgiveness. A risen Savior meant that a mother who delivered her son into this world would be delivered by him into the age to come. It would mean that a close friend raised from the grave would witness an even greater resurrection. And sadly, while one criminal died in unrepentance, another by the grace of Christ would enter paradise with his newly found Lord.

This Friday is good because the injustices of a Roman government and a Jewish Sanhedrin would crumble in history while the kingdom of God would flourish through the proclamation of a dying and rising Savior. The cruelty of political oppression and the violence of zealous rebellion would be futile to stop the church from proclaiming the glory of that cross, and that proclamation would turn human history upside down and will eventually bring an end to all war.

This Friday is good because God himself willed that his own Son should suffer the cruel intentions of sinful man. He did this in order that he might demonstrate the perfections of his justice against our sin and the immeasurable nature of his mercy toward us, and all of us here tonight who have come to know the love of God in Jesus Christ, our Lord, can celebrate the awful beauty of that cross on which the Prince of Glory died.

10 Here is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and gave his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

You are welcome to sit quietly and stay as long as you would like to, and then when you are ready, walk quietly out.

Father, thank you for our evening, for the reminder of the grace that you have shown us in Christ; for the truth that though our sins are great, your grace is greater; that our

*sorrows can be turned into joy because our Savior lives. For it is in his name we pray.
Amen.*