

"A Meditation on the Seven Last Words"

Isaiah 53:11

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Good Friday C

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Boise, Idaho

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The Word of the Lord from Isaiah 53:11: He shall see the labor of His soul, and be satisfied. By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many, For He shall bear their iniquities. This is the Word of the Lord.

What will you say at a time like this? It certainly isn't a happy occasion. Death doesn't lend itself to laughter, nor does the execution of a criminal. So what will you say?

It's a foreboding sight, that hill called Golgotha. The hilltop has seen the jeering crowds throughout the day, mocking especially the Man on the center cross. He was already beaten to a pulp by zealous Roman detachment, then driven to exhaustion in carrying His own cross as far as He could manage. Now, the sky has turned a foreboding black-not just dark clouds, but a darkened sun. Held to the cross by nails, He gasps for breath and manages seven last words. Soon, He'll breathe His last-and the earth will begin to shake. At such a time, what will you say?

We must mention, too, for this adds to the grief of the death: While Jesus is executed as a criminal, He is guilty of absolutely nothing. After the trials He has endured before Caiaphas, Pilate and Herod, it is apparent to all that Jesus dies an innocent man. What will you say to such a miscarriage of justice?

Let us add one more facet to this sorrow: Jesus dies for sin, but not His own. Whose, then? Isaiah declares,

Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. 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. (Is. 53:4-6)

He bears your grief and sorrows and sin and iniquity. He is afflicted for your sins-the ones that still trouble you, as well as the ones that you committed without a thought as to the consequences. The consequences are plainly in view, for so He is afflicted. He bears your infirmities to the cross: Sin brings death, and sickness is its outrider; so He suffers the destruction of His health and body as part of the wages of sin. He is there not for Him, but for you. What will you say?

Many have different ideas of what to say. In our clean and coddled society, many will simply say that we shouldn't say anything about it, because death and bloodshed are too disturbing. However, this is to deny the truth that each one of us must endure death; and to turn our back on the crucified One is to reject our only hope for life. Some will tell you that Christ's death should have no great

effect on you whatsoever: His is just one unjust death among many, and all this talk about Him bearing your sins is a tool to subdue you or a crutch for your guilt-plagued psyche. If that's the case, don't say anything and skip this service. But if that's the case, then you are still lost in your sins. Others will go the opposite way, point to the cross and use it to drive you into the ground with shame. "He suffers there because of you! It's all your fault! Now, finally, maybe you'll clean up your act and be a better person." If that's the case, then you should say that from now on you'll purpose to do better. But if that's the case, it means that God subjected His Son to death only as an example, to guilt you into being better; He punished His Son to make you feel bad.

So as you look at the cross, what should you say? Before you answer, here's an idea. Listen to what Jesus says; listen to the dying Man's last words. Listen to what He has to say from the cross. See how great His desire to speak! Sinful man has nailed His hands and feet so that He cannot move to touch and heal. They've also offered Him wine mixed with myrrh to dull the pain-and to keep Him from saying anything else. But He's refused the anesthetic so that He might speak to you.

So hear the Son of God: First, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." How awesome this prayer! One could use Jesus' death as the ultimate indictment of mankind: First, sinful man rebelled against God in the Garden-and now they kill His Son. This proves that man deserves only destruction! But Christ does not die to seal your fate and condemn you. Even as He is lifted up, He announces that He dies so that you might be forgiven.

He speaks a second time, this time to the penitent robber, and promises, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise." Cling to these words for yourself as well; for when death draws near, you will likely be haunted with memories of sin and questions of worthiness: "Have I been good enough that God would save me?" Therefore, remember these words to the robber, to a man who had wasted his life preying upon others, and now had no time left to make up for it. But although he did not deserve it, Jesus delivers Him with a Word of absolution. Thus He says to you on your deathbed, "You do not have salvation because of you, but because of Me. And because I have died, assuredly I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

He speaks a third time, this time to His mother Mary and His disciple, John. To Mary, "Woman, behold your son!" To John, "Behold your mother!" There is wonderful comfort for you. Even as His weight pulls upon the nails that hold His hands to the beam and His scourged back rubs raw on the post, He cares for His mother. Even then, He is still at work to keep the commandments. You have no hope of salvation by your keeping of God's Law, for you have not kept it perfectly; but you do have hope of salvation, because Jesus has kept it perfectly for you-even as His blood was shed.

Near the end, He speaks a fourth time: "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" That is, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" After the presence of His Father from eternity, Jesus is now abandoned by His Father, and so He suffers hell on that cross. It is a horrific suffering, but be sure to answer this question: Why does God forsake His Son? So that He will not forsake you. Jesus suffers that abandonment for you and your sin. Because He has been forsaken at the cross, the risen Son now promises you, "Lo, I will never leave you nor forsake you."

Again He speaks, a short fifth word: "I thirst." This goes well with fourth word we just heard. The Savior came to give life; and time and time again within Scripture, that life is described as living water which refreshes forever (cf. Is. 35:6; Jn. 4:10). At the cross, the Lord has taken the sinner's place in judgment and death; thus He has no life left and so He thirsts for living water. But again,

why does He thirst? He is thirsting in your place, forsaken by God so that you might be delivered.

So, through the first five words, the Lord Jesus declares that He is on that cross in your place for the forgiveness of sins. He is suffering your judgment and dying your death. But this does not last, and His sixth word is one of great comfort: "It is finished!" What is finished? The plan of redemption, the payment for your sin. Christ has paid that in full for the sins of the world, and He will not suffer for it anymore, ever again. Neither will you. For when Jesus announces, "It is finished," He declares to you that there is no more work to be done. It is not left to you to do ½ the job, to earn this forgiveness by your efforts and merit. Rather, salvation is a gift of God, not of works; and so you can be sure that you are delivered.

He speaks one last time as He breathes His last: "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit." Treasure those words, too: The Son was forsaken by His Father, but no longer. As He dies, He is once again in His Father's care. He dies with the glad confidence, "I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord" (Ps. 118:17). And risen again, He declares these works to you, so that you might know of your salvation.

That's what He says while He is bleeding and dying on the cross. He does not call down curses upon you from heaven, nor does He want His death to make you collapse in despair at your sin. So what shall you say?

How about this: "Thanks be to God." Indeed, thanks be to God for the Sacrifice of His Son. This cross is your redemption-it is Gospel, not Law. As we will soon pray in the litany, by His death our Lord has mercy upon us. By His death, He delivers us. By His cross and passion, He has redeemed the world.

For all this, we say, "Thanks be to God." We sing,

Through Thy suffering, death and merit,
I eternal life inherit.
Thousand, thousand thanks shall be,
Dearest Jesus, unto Thee. (TLH 151)

And, not wanting this great Sacrifice to go to waste, we pray, "For Jesus' sake, forgive us our sins."

Do not run away from that hill because death is emotionally upsetting. You and I will each face our own death eventually, so face this one now-for Jesus' death is your life. At the cross He fulfills the prophecy, "Death, I shall be the death of you! Grave, I shall be your destruction!" (Hos. 13:14). Jesus' death here is your comfort in death, for He is the firstfruits of the resurrection. And if He is the firstfruits, then there are more to follow. As Christ is risen from the dead, so He will raise you from the dead.

Do not leave this hill with a callous heart, as if Christ's death is a crutch for guilt that you only perceive. No, this death is redemption from sin and guilt that you actually have, that would consign you to God's judgment forever. The guilt you have is real; but so is the forgiveness that Christ wins here, and the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses you from all of your sins (I Jn. 1:7).

Do not leave this hill thinking that Jesus died to motivate you to do better. That was not His purpose;

instead, He died because you could not be obedient as God commanded. Instead, rejoice that, on account of His death, Christ forgives you all of your sins. And because you are forgiven, those good works will follow.

And finally, do not leave this hill with only mourning and sadness. Christ does not die there to leave you in grief, but to deliver you into God's presence and the fullness of joy. Calvary is hardly a happy sight, but you know by now that the greatest joys that God gives are often masked in a shadow of pain and sorrow. The cross of Jesus brings life for all who believe, but that life is gained through His suffering and death. So also the death of a Christian means deliverance from affliction to eternal life, yet we are left with grief until we are delivered.

There is no doubt: Golgotha is an ugly hill on a darkened day with an innocent Man crucified. Thus we have a solemn celebration this night. But do not mistake that solemnity for despair. As you peer at your Savior on the cross, what can you say but "Thanks be to God"? For you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen