



“Good Friday Meditation”

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INTRODUCTION

Tonight’s meditation, like a poem or song, has movements or stanzas; in this case, three of them. First, we will focus on one particular word. Second, we will focus on another particular word. Third, with those words in mind, we will embrace the meaning of this day.

FIRST WORD: HOPE

“Hope” - the first word is “Hope.” If you participated in any of our Wednesday services during Lent or paid attention to weekly “Sunday News” e-blasts and worship inserts, you know that the theme for Lent (and Holy Week) has been this: “Faith, Hope and Healing for all: Abundant life in Christ.”

The first half of that theme comes from the ending of this congregation’s Welcome Statement: “Grace is a place of faith, hope and healing for all.” And as our Senior Pastor, John Hillmer, likes to add, “All means ALL.”

Over the course of several gatherings at Noon and 7 p.m. we have been cycling-through the words Faith, Hope and Healing. One word each time – although it can be hard to separate them. Along the way, we have revisited some thought-provoking Scripture readings, starting with chapter 6 of Matthew’s Gospel on Ash Wednesday (which reminds us to fast, pray, and give alms); we have fasted from our normal midday or evening routines (instead, choosing to gather in this place); we have prayed differently than during Sunday worship (including laying-on of hands and anointing); we have discussed our own abundance of faith, hope and healing and we have discussed how to offer faith, hope and healing to others (such as making quilts and monetary donations to Lutheran World Relief).

Today, we are back to the word "Hope". John Maxwell, a motivational speaker respected by church and business leaders alike, says, "Hope sings when all melodies are gone." Maxwell and others also claim it is an acronym: "Holding On, Praying Expectantly". Tertullian, a "Church Father" (i.e., another name for "early Christian theologian"), says, in one of his many writings, "Hope is patience with the lamp lit." Paul the Apostle, whose conversion and outreach ministry we read about the Bible (in the Book of Acts and in letters he wrote or co-authored) uses a word we translate as "hope" at least 29 times; sometimes simply, such as writing a location to say he "hoped" to visit but other times Paul used that word quite profoundly.

In the fifth chapter of his letter to the Romans, for example, Paul says: *"We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace on which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. For while we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly." Paul goes on to say "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us."*

SECOND WORD: GOOD

And that, of course, brings us to Good Friday; but, before we delve too deeply into what the day means for us, we need to discuss the word "Good". So, "Good" the second word is "Good".

"Good" Friday is the day we commemorate the crucifixion of Jesus: Barabbas, a man convicted of murder and insurrection, is let go. Instead, a man who committed no crime against the state is: forced to carry a huge wooden cross up to the hill where that cross would become his "tree of death". Where he was stripped of clothes, placed between two common thieves, and brutally tortured for at least three hours by the state on behalf of religious authorities who felt threatened by his theology.

Executing Jesus like this was not pleasant, attractive, or socially correct; not a U.S.D.A. grade of meat between "standard" and choice; and not desirable except, perhaps, in the eyes of those authorities. Those are all definitions for "good" in Webster's New Riverside Dictionary (second edition).

So how can we; how DARE we, call this day "Good" Friday? It turns out we need to go back to an archaic definition. You see, "good" is derived from the Old English word for "god". So, it originally was an adjective meaning "holy"; as in, calling the Holy Bible the "Good Book".

Now, Webster's actually has 15 definitions for the word "good" and some of them touch on why we hold this day so holy: one definition is "serving the desired end" - the death of Jesus did fulfill the prophesy in Isaiah. Another is "kind" - Jesus being willing to die for our salvation is more than kind. He loved us, He loves us, that much!

THIRD MOVEMENT: EMBRACING THE MEANING OF THIS DAY

Additional definitions of "good" to keep in mind as we enter the third movement of this meditation include "safe" and "obedient" and "complete". "Faith, Hope and Healing for all: Abundant life in Christ." – We've already discussed the first half of this theme. The second half comes from Chapter 10, verse 10 of the Gospel according to John, which quotes Jesus as saying, "*I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*"

In many bibles, this verse is from a part of Chapter 10 that has a subtitle: "The Good Shepherd" - ah, there's that word "Good" again! What does a "Good Shepherd" do, besides making sure there is abundant pasture and clean water? They keep the sheep safe! To the point that, they will obediently do what? As Jesus says in the very next verse, "*The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*"

Regardless of what puzzling or gory theory of "atonement" you ascribe to, the "bottom line" is that Jesus laid down his life for us! Where you there when this shepherd laid down his life to obey and complete the grand plan for our salvation? As the song goes, "Where you there when they crucified my Lord". Since he died once, for the salvation of all, a salvation transcending time as well as space, we were there, in a metaphysical sense. Now, unlike those who were physically present for the crucifixion, we have benefit of seeing through the passage of time and the mystical eyes of faith that what the authorities thought was the "tree of death" for Jesus is the "tree of life" for us. We were grafted onto it, through our baptism.

I challenge you to more fully embrace what happened on that day by imagining what it would have been like to been there as we finish our descent into the physical darkness of this service and also later, perhaps tomorrow, when you have more time.

Would you, like Mary and other women who accompanied Him in His earthly ministry, also accompany Jesus as His human life in this world was extinguished? Would you be

waiting for the end, ready to deal with the bodily remains, like Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus? Or would you run and hide, like most if not all of the named disciples?

You know, I wonder were those words that Jesus cried-out as he hung there, dying meant to be a Jewish prayer based on Psalm 22 as Pastor John suggested last night. Where those words really spoken to God the Father? I hope not; rather, just like the image of my favorite Crucifix, perhaps God the Father was right there, supporting the Son through it all (and the Holy Spirit was there too, urging them both on)!

What if those words instead were the anguished cry of a jilted, loving shepherd to his sheep? "*My God, My God! Why have you forsaken me?*" And if your imagination takes you to an uncomfortable place as you ponder your role and that question, remember that there is hope; even in the darkness, there is hope. In fact, hope may shine the brightest when darkness is all around us.

Thanks be to God!