

“WHEN YOU WERE THERE ...”

Good Friday Service Luke 23:44-49

April 10, 2009

There are two parts to the Good Friday story. The first is what happened way back then, when Jesus surrendered himself to the worst hostilities humanity can imagine. Jesus cried when he came into the city on Palm Sunday because he knew the ordeal that lay before him, and he knew why the ordeal was so necessary. He saw the dark depravity within the human heart. Humanity has not changed very much since the days of Noah, when *“The LORD saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.”* (Genesis 6:5) Even after the flood when only Noah and his family were left, still the Lord said, *“Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood.”* (Genesis 8:21) Jesus understood that. And on that Friday long ago, Jesus willingly walked into the midst of evil to give himself up for us.

Were you there when they crucified the Lord? It is important for us to be at the scene of the crucifixion so we can see the truly amazing love of God on display. Over the years it is easy to move away from the horror of it all. The blood and gore can be ignored a bit more year by year. Some have even said that if Jesus is God then he didn’t really suffer at all. It was just the illusion of pain and death. But Jesus was also a man, a man with all the fears and doubts that we have. And when we hear the snap of the whip, the clash of metal on metal as the hammer drives a spike into flesh and wood, we are reminded once again of the harsh reality of that day long ago.

Jesus was a mess. His blood was poured out for all to see. It began when he was slapped during the interrogation before the Sanhedrin. Then a little more blood poured out when Pilate ordered that he be whipped 39 times. And with each lash little bits of stone and metal would tear into his flesh. Then soldiers took things into their own hands as they mocked him by pressing a crown of thorns on his head, as they stripped him and beat him with hands and rods. Drop by drop his blood, his life was being poured out. At Golgotha the spikes were driven into his wrists and into his feet. And finally a spear was plunged into his side, probably piercing his heart, so the blood and water could gush out, and the last bit of life could drain from him. The soldiers and the crowd were surprised that he died so quickly. Crucifixion could sometimes take days. But weakened by the constant, continuous loss of blood, Jesus had no more life to give.

In the midst of this execution, some fool, maybe many fools cried out, *“If you are the son of God, come down from the cross and save yourself.”* (Luke 23:35) Was there ever a more

powerful temptation placed before anyone? Jesus must have desperately wanted to end his season of pain and grief. There were other times when Jesus was threatened with death when he just walked away, leaving the angry mobs with no one to attack. And he could have done that on that Friday. Instead he remained on that cross. He loved you so much, he loves us so much that he took our sin upon himself. He accepted our punishment so we would not have to pay the price. It was the love and grace of God on display for all the world to see. That's why it was called God's Friday, which became Good Friday, because the compassion of God in the person of Jesus was poured out for all the world to see. And it was done not for God but for you and for me. Which is why we need to be there, to return to Calvary to remember the amazing price he paid to give to us the amazing gift of grace. Were you there then? Never forget the pain Christ endured because his passion for you was so great.

But there is another part to the Good Friday story. The second part is not long ago on a hill far away. No, the second part happens this day, and every day. It has been said that having knowledge is not nearly as important as knowing what to do with it, how to use that knowledge. So it is with this. Many know that Jesus died for them, but what difference does it make? When you stand in the presence of the crucified Christ, what effect does it have on your life?

For many it doesn't have any effect. Jesus died for them but they don't care. Now I know that there is nothing we can do to make God love us more. Nor is there anything we can do to make God love us less. But I think there are many who tempt the Lord in that. The unchurched, those outside of Christ, make up about 55% of the community around us. 55% look at that picture of the crucified Jesus and they just walk on. And actually I think the number of people who look upon Jesus and are unmoved, are not touched deeply by this portrait of compassion, is much higher than that. It helps explain why 90% of the people say they believe in God, 60-70% say they are Christians, but only 40% attend worship in any given month, and a mere 28% or less show up at worship in any given week. When they are there in the presence of the crucified Jesus, they simply continue on, walking in sin and waiting for death.

There is a legend that during the reign of Nero, at the start of the persecutions against the Christians, the Apostle Peter decided to take a hike. He was fleeing Rome rather than be executed for his faith. But as he was walking down the Appian Way he saw Jesus coming toward him, carrying his cross, just as he did on that Friday long ago. Peter asked, "Quo vadis?" "Where are you going?" And Jesus said, "I am going to be crucified again. This time for you." Those are the words Jesus says to all who are not changed when they look upon the cross. Peter knew that he could not ask Jesus to do that for him again. So he returned to Rome where he was arrested and crucified. And for three days he hung on that cross and testified to

his faith as he preached the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Peter was there when Jesus was crucified, and he could not allow it to happen again, even if much of the world would.

There are others who look upon Jesus and do not grasp the significance of it. Often they are very well meaning people. They see Jesus and are disturbed by the image, but not enough to change. These are people who know that Jesus left the glories of heaven to live with us, to be like us. In humility he emptied himself of the pride and power of privilege so that he could know the same pain, hunger, exhaustion, frustration, tension, and stress that we know. He went to such great trouble to be like us. Such amazing grace.

But when they stand in the presence of the crucified Lord, when they are there, they still try to make him like us. They bend him and mold him to how they think Jesus and God should be. They try to clean him up a bit so he is not so hard to look at. We try to make him like us. And sometimes in the church, we will only reach out to others if they are like us. They must look like us, live like us, work like us, think like us. I have known so many congregations who have told pastors that they want him or her to bring in new members, to fill the pews. But when new people come, they are then frustrated because the new people don't look like them or think like them. What they are really saying to pastors is that we want you to fill up the church with our children and our grandchildren. You need to bring them back because they must look like us, live like us, work like us, think like us.

Well here's the thing. If Jesus only reached out to people like himself, none of us would be here now. For when he hung on that cross, freely sacrificing himself for us, enduring the agony and the angst in the midst of evil and hatred, surrounded by sin and death, he was not like any other before or since. He was, he is the Son of God, pouring out his life that we might live in him. And when we stand at the cross the only truly faithful response is to allow his grace, his love to transform us; to empty ourselves of the pride and power of privilege so we, too, can stretch out our arms to receive him; so we, too, can begin to pour out our lives so the love and grace of God can be seen in us and through us.

When you were there at the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus, what did you do? Having seen and felt the extraordinary love of God being poured out for your sake, how have you been touched? How have you been changed? Knowing that in grace Jesus came to be like you, how will you now strive to be like him? How will you show the world a love so deep, so strong? He poured out his life to tell the world, to show the world how great God's love is for you and for me. And for those of us who were there, who are there to see the crucified Jesus, now it is our turn to tell the world, to show the world. In your life may it be so, now and forever. Amen.