

Pastor's Message – Good Friday, 2024
Psalm 22:1-26
Passion According to John

It is now Good Friday, 40 days from the beginning of Lent; we stand now at the foot of the cross. We have been led to this point, to this place, to the crucifixion of our Savior, who is the sacrifice for us. We have experienced the gifts of the cross: the gifts of forgiveness, hope, peace, love, perseverance, humility, and service. We have seen in the cross what it means to sacrifice.

St. Paul writes to the Romans (5:7), “Most people would not be willing to die [even] for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good.” He is talking about sacrifice—sacrificing oneself. The concept of sacrifice can have many levels and dimensions. But on this day we see the ultimate sacrifice on the cross for our sins. Jesus gave of himself fully, freely and completely. He did not hold any part of himself back. He did not say no to any aspect of his mission to remove the power of sin, death and the devil from us. Because of the depth of Christ's sacrifice, it is hard for us to look at the cross today. It was hard for those who were there, too. The women stood at a distance. Many who had heard of Jesus or known him certainly must have turned away as they saw him lifted up the cross on the outskirts of town at The Place of the Skull.

Crucifixions were designed to be public displays of humiliation after all and deterrents to all of those who were considering claiming to be a king or a god or an opponent to Roman authority. This type of death was not private; each pain, each agony, each embarrassment was seen by all.

There was no hiding what was happening. People could see firsthand that Jesus was in the throes of dying. And that might have served to prove to any doubters out there that may have wondered if Jesus really died. There was no denying it. Christ's physical sacrifice was very real. At the end of the day, the soldiers recognized that he was already dead even before they took him down from the cross.

But what the people at the cross that day may not have seen that readily or that clearly was the internal spiritual sacrifice that Jesus was enduring. The heavy burden of every sin of every person past, present and future was placed upon his

sinless divine nature. He felt every inner pain and struggle of sin that we experienced and took that all away with his final breath. “It is finished,” he said. With his death, the power of the dying happening inside of us each day is removed and replaced by the power of new life through him.

This sacrifice of our Savior on the cross on this day is the culmination of thousands of years of promises from God and centuries of waiting by God’s people for this moment to arrive. This sacrifice was even foreshadowed when the high priests in the Temple in Jerusalem would sacrifice animals on the altar in the Holy of Holies, sprinkling the animals’ blood there to atone for the sins of the people.

Because of the sacrifice on the cross, all such sacrifices are no longer necessary. Jesus is the Lamb of God who was slain for the sins of the whole world. Once in heaven, surely, we will praise the Lamb upon the throne, the Book of Revelation tells us. We will see with our own eyes there the one who sacrificed himself for us, and we will rejoice. Even John the Baptist, when he saw Jesus coming toward him early in his ministry, said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). John the Baptist even then knew that a sacrifice like no other would happen on this day, this Good Friday.

So what does this sacrifice on the cross mean for us? In a word, everything! We are forever changed because of Christ crucified. The wrath of God over our sins is no longer a threat. Jesus takes on the eternal consequences of our sins by dying as a sinless person in our place. We are no longer doomed to die for sin. We are forgiven and free and able to live a new life in him. Because Jesus sacrificed himself for us, the devil has no more power over us because Jesus has defeated him. We can overpower him through our faith in Jesus and the strength of the Holy Spirit within us.

Christ’s sacrifice on the cross for us also enables us to be what St. Paul calls living sacrifices. He says in Romans 12:1: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” How does that look? St. Paul gives us some guidance here: “I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned” (Romans 12:3). Living a sacrificial life for Christ means putting others before yourself, leaning on your faith in God above your own

desiring and freely giving of your time, talent and possessions for the sake of others and the sake of Christ.

St. Paul was writing to many in the early Church who were being persecuted for their faith in Jesus. Many were, in fact, later crucified like Christ was. That is why St. Paul said, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). We know because of Christ’s crucifixion that our lives should be dedicated to him in response to the giving of himself. And we know that death is not the end of the story for those who are in Christ.

Death is now just the doorway to heaven with him because of the events of Good Friday. As living sacrifices, then, we should no longer fear death because death was destroyed by the cross of Christ. We should no longer look to things of this earth to satisfy our human needs. We should look to things above, where Christ is now seated. Our bodies, our thoughts, our plans all belong to Christ as we set our sights solely on his guidance.

So what lies before us on this Good Friday? There is sadness, of course, at the death of our Redeemer. There is darkness as the sacrifice of Christ comes to pass. But there is joy on the horizon even as Joseph of Arimathea places the dead body of Jesus into a garden tomb. There is a glimmer of hope while the women watch to see where they have laid Jesus so they know where to return to anoint him with spices in three days. There is love in the bond between Mary and John as they walk from Calvary to care for one another as a mother and son would, as Jesus told them to. If you think about it, Mary and John were sacrificing themselves for the needs of the other, as Christ did for them on the cross.

There are, no doubt moments and times of sadness in our lives in that we are bound to this earth, bound to inevitable death, suffering, and loss. But, because of Jesus’ sacrifice and his victory over sin and death, you can look for glimpses of joy in the sadness of today in your own life. Watch for promising acts of compassion that point to future glory. Respond to one another with selflessness and sincere commitment to bonding as brothers and sisters in Christ. There is great meaning in the outcome of a sacrifice and the gracious giving of everything we are and have in Christ. When we recognize Jesus’ sacrifice and his victory—our victory too, we grow as followers, and others grow in faith as well from what they see happening by God’s grace in and through Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross.

So this Good Friday, again, be guided by the cross. Be guided to sacrifice. Be willing to be a living sacrifice for Christ and others, as Christ sacrificed himself for us. Amen.