

“AT THE CROSS” part 5

Psalm 42; John 19:16b-30

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We've been reflecting, this Lent, on Jesus' words from the cross, as the gospel writers have given them to us. From Luke, we considered: "Father, in your hands I commit my spirit," "Father, forgive them," and "Today you will be with me in paradise." We thought about how Matthew and Mark tell us only that Jesus asked "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In John's gospel, we read about three things Jesus said. Last week Jerry talked about one of them: Jesus' words to his mother and to one of his disciples: "Behold your son ... behold your mother." Today we come to the last two, the things Jesus said, according to John, right before he died: "I am thirsty," and "It is finished."



They are the simplest of statements, yet these words somehow carry a powerful weight of feeling and meaning. They bring us close to the humanity of Jesus, to his physical suffering, to his death, which is imminent as he speaks. And yet these words also carry the unmistakable message that something more is happening here than meets the eye.

"I am thirsty," says Jesus,



and we know immediately what that felt like, because we know what it is to be thirsty. And so we know, again, that Jesus shared our humanity, our absolute dependence on water. A human being can go a good many days without food, but not very long without water – and so we are reminded frequently of our neediness, our vulnerability, our inability to be sufficient unto ourselves. Our thirst reminds us.

That might be why the Bible moves so easily from the literal, wet water on which our lives depend to figurative water, water as a way of speaking about God's gift of spiritual life.



Remember Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well? One minute they are talking about the water in the well and the next Jesus is recognizing her unmet spiritual needs and offering her "living water."

Remember Jesus saying, "I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. ... As you did it to the least of these, you did it to me"? We can hear that this is about the real, necessary, safe and clean water that even still some of our sisters and brothers don't have access to. But we can also hear that it's also about those who are thirsty for hope, for good news, for meaning, for truth, for something to refresh their weary spirits.



Jesus' words from the cross echo the Psalm, which also likens physical thirst to spiritual longing: "My soul thirsts for God." The Psalm writer expresses a deep longing for God's presence, and also a sense of God's absence. "When will I behold the face of God?" He "pours out his soul." But ultimately he comes back to trust - trust that unquenched thirst is not the last word. God is faithful. The thirst will be quenched. Life will be renewed. There will be joy again.

On the cross, we see Jesus sharing even our longing for God – what we might say is our ultimate thirst. At this darkest, most extreme moment, we hear his desire for reconnection with God.

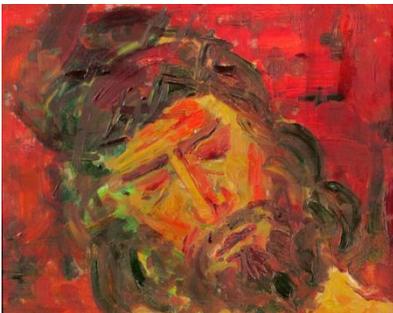


What he's offered, by someone standing by, is merely some sour wine. Not fresh cool water to ease his thirst. Not a word of compassion or hope to ease his abandonment. Nothing that could really satisfy. But he already knows that only the presence of God satisfies the soul's longing,



He “pours out his soul,” knowing that his thirst will be quenched with living water, knowing that, as he told us, those who “hunger and thirst for righteousness” are blessed and will be satisfied.

When he says, “It is finished,” it sounds to us like despair, resignation, or defeat. That’s certainly what this looks like.



But there’s more to it: this is also a statement of victory. Jesus’ work is done. He has done what he set out to do. He has fulfilled his life’s purposes. He has brought God’s presence into the brokenness of human life, and in dying, he is returning that broken but beloved humanity into God’s hands.



“It is finished” harkens back to Genesis, when God, having created the world, blessed it and made it fruitful, saw that it was good. God “finished the work,” we read there, and God rested.

Here at the cross, we are invited to see God’s new creation: broken humanity reunited with God.



We are invited to see the victory of God's way in the world – the way of suffering, sacrifice, humility, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, and generosity. The powers of death, hate, selfishness, judgement, greed, force, and guilt look strong, but won't – don't – have the final say.

We've heard all the things the gospels tell us about what Jesus said from the cross. But that isn't all there is to say. Before the end of John's gospel, Jesus will have three more urgent and important things to say to his disciples:



“Peace be with you”
“Feed my sheep”
“Follow me.”

Before we get to those words, though, we need to follow Jesus through the events of the last week of his life – into Jerusalem with the crowds, at the table with his friends, through betrayal and abandonment and mockery and torture and death. I hope that our reflections on the cross during Lent have prepared us to revisit that story, maybe with a little new insight. And then, we will be ready for Easter, ready to share in Jesus' new life as he has shared in our broken humanness.

The suffering of the cross will be turned into victory. It is still being turned into victory in the lives of those who follow Jesus. Thanks be to God.

Resources:

Into Your Hand: Confronting Good Friday, Walter Brueggemann