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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/13/2014, Palm Sunday
Matthew 26:14—27:66

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text is from our Gospel Lesson. It speaks of the “sixth hour”:

⁴⁵Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. ⁴⁶And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:45-46, RSV)

I think I have an answer to that heartbreaking question: His heavenly Father had *not* forsaken him. Nor will he forsake you when you are stretching yourself out in love. He might be hidden from your sight, hidden even from your heart. But he is not absent. On that, you can depend.

Theologians over the years have suggested that God had looked away from Jesus on the Cross because Jesus was bearing upon himself the sins of the whole world, and that God cannot look upon sin. Let it be so. It seems a good and pious opinion. Still, our heavenly Father did not abandon Jesus. When Jesus breathed his final breath and commended his spirit into the hands of his heavenly Father, his heavenly Father was surely there to be commended to.

And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost. (Luke 23:46, KJV)

The spirit of Jesus did not simply fall to the ground for failure of heavenly hands to receive it.

TTRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY

Let’s structure this Palm Sunday sermon by harkening back to Transfiguration Sunday. Recall Saint Matthew’s description of our Beautiful Savior:

²And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light. (Matthew 17:2, RSV)

Now we see the opposite of this. In Saint Matthew’s Gospel, the story of the Crucifixion of Our Lord is rather precisely the undoing of the story of the

Transfiguration of Our Lord. The beautiful elements of the Transfiguration are stripped away, one by one, in the Crucifixion.

For example, think of the light in the story of the Transfiguration. The face of Jesus “shone like the sun” and his “garments became white as light.” But what do we find at the Crucifixion? We find darkness at midday:

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon (Matthew 27:45, RSV)

This is eerie and uncanny, that there should be darkness for three hours at midday.

In the story of the Transfiguration, the garments of Jesus are radiant, “white as light.” But in the story of the Crucifixion, the garments of our Lord are stripped away from him:

³⁵ And when they had crucified him, they divided his garments among them by casting lots; (Matthew 27:35, RSV)

On the holy mountain, Jesus had saints of old at his right hand and his left, Moses and Elijah. But on the cross, he had malefactors on his right hand and his left -- robbers justly condemned and executed.

But, to my mind, perhaps the most heartbreaking and astonishing of all is the voice of the heavenly Father. On the Mount of Transfiguration, the voice of the Father is heard loud and clear, with its loving tones:

⁵He was still speaking, when lo, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.”

But on the cross, there is a divine silence, so that Jesus is led to cry out about being abandoned:

⁴⁶ And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”

On the holy mountain, the three disciples – Peter, James, and John – beheld the Transfiguration of our Lord. Now we, in sacred imagination as we read aloud the Passion story just now, have beheld the stripping away of Christ’s glory, beauty, and in the end, even his life. The three saw the beauty. We many have seen the pain.

These two stories are so intimately connected that I think we can say this: The story of the Transfiguration shows us the truth of things at the Crucifixion. People looking on saw only suffering and abandonment. But from the eyes of heaven,

Jesus never shone so brilliantly and so beautifully as on that cross. And his heavenly Father certainly was not absent, but could say with the highest emotion:

This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.

THIS WEEK AT WORK

This week at work, if it is a bad week, you will feel closer to the Cross than to the holy Mount of Transfiguration. But the truth is, you will be shining better than ever if you are living a Christ-like life on your job. Furthermore, there might not be a soul in sight who seems to be on your side, and yet I hope you can take some comfort in imagining that Moses and Elijah and Jesus himself are nearby, watching over you, and that the heavenly Father is saying of you, right in the midst of your hard time:

This is my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased.

And this week at home, if you hardly have two nickels to rub together, and the children are trying your patience, and your imagination roams a little to what might be a nicer or easier life, then you might feel closer to the Cross than to the holy Mount of Transfiguration. And yet, if you remain steady and faithful and battle on in love, then you be shining with great beauty in the eyes of heaven. Why, Moses and Elijah and Jesus himself will look at your small corner of the world and see great glory shining from it. And your heavenly Father will say of you:

This is my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased.

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

As I near the end of this sermon, let me speak of a classic book. If you should like to read a good book, I recommend Charles Dickens *A Tale of Two Cities*. You can get it for free on Kindle.¹ Even if you have read it before, back when you were young, I think you will find it moving to read again. The book tells the story of a man who never shone so brightly as when he approached his death and taunts of the crowd. His name is Sydney Carton, and for most of his career he has been a drunk lawyer.

At the end of the book, Sydney Carton – an aristocratic wastrel – substitutes his life for that of his noble rival, Charles Darnay. Sydney had loved in vain: he loved Lucie Manette, the wife of his rival. And he went to his death loving Lucie. But also he loved his rival, Charles, and in the end took the place of Charles at the

¹ http://www.amazon.com/Tale-Two-Cities-Charles-Dickens-ebook/dp/B004EHZXVQ/ref=sr_1_1?s=digital-text&ie=UTF8&qid=1395424329&sr=1-1&keywords=a+tale+of+two+cities+kindle+free

cruel guillotine of the French Revolution. Who knows why? Who knows the ways of the human heart. But bit by bit, the drunken lawyer Sydney Carton gains his own nobility and faith, and when he dies, if people had been able to ask him what he thought of his approaching death, the final words of the novel express his firm conviction:

It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known.²

So it is with Jesus. On the cross -- mocked, beaten, and finally dying – Jesus was never so beautiful. There on the Cross, he was most clearly our Beautiful Savior.

Or rather, the other way around. It is not that Jesus is like Charles Darnay, but Darnay as his death approaches is somehow like Jesus. All of the great heroes are Christ-figures, in my opinion. They all put us somehow in mind of Jesus and this extraordinary thing he did: He substituted his life for ours. And the words of the novel could just as well be his words:

It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known.

The one difference is that Jesus is not about to rest. He died for you, for me, and he lives for you, for me. His priestly intercessions for us are continual, and his shaping of history are tireless, all to bring this weary old world to the end our Maker had intended for us, even the very Kingdom of God.

Though Jesus lies broken and dead by the end of today's Gospel story, he is nonetheless our Beautiful Savior, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

² Dickens, Charles (2010-12-01). *A Tale of Two Cities* (p. 237). Public Domain Books. Kindle Edition.