

Sermon Series: The Seven Last Words of Jesus

“Into Your Hands I Commend My Spirit”

Passion/Palm Sunday: 13 April 2014

Preaching Text: Luke 23:44-46

Hear now the lesson from Luke’s Gospel:

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun’s light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Having said this, he breathed his last (Luke 23:44-46).

When noon arrives, likely the brightest hour of the day, Luke shares with readers the moment’s importance noting; “darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.” Darkness often alerts biblical readers that something vital is happening. This darkness suggests that God has withdrawn God’s hand of favor from the land. Do you remember what the earth was like before God entered the picture? Genesis tells us that “the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, [before] while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2). Darkness signals a biblical omen, portent, or warning. For but one other example, when the Fourth Gospel describes Jesus foretelling his betrayal, John writes: “So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out . . . [and adding ominously] . . . And it was night (John 13:30). Both the dark and the night foreshadow the menacing evil churning around Jesus near the end of the passion story.

The use of darkness by the biblical writers runs as a consistent theme throughout our Bible. After Yahweh hardened Pharaoh’s heart and he refused to let the people of Israel go, “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Stretch out your hand toward heaven so that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness that can be felt’ ” (Exodus 10:21). The darkness lasted three days and this plague was the penultimate plague the Lord sent upon Egypt. Perhaps Luke

recalls this Exodus story as he relates the Jesus story. Darkness is one sign of the severity of human sin involved in Jesus' crucifixion.

Have you ever heard someone plead with a friend, "What is it going to take for you to wake up and pay attention to the mess you are making of your life?" It takes a strong and courageous friend to say something like this—and a whole lot of love. In Alcoholics Anonymous there is a principle that states a person will not cease from the destructive behavior that alcoholism represents until she or he hits bottom. Then and only then, will individuals come to terms with their addiction and destructive behavior. Only after there is nothing left to lose—no job, no family, no self-respect—will a person finally decide to change. Good Friday's darkness, from noon to three o'clock, represents humankind's hitting rock bottom. Human sin crucified God's son of glory.

During this darkness, Luke tells us that "the curtain of the temple was torn in two." I suppose we could look at this occurrence in several ways. First, the tearing of the temple curtain that divided the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place might mean that the glory of the Lord departed the temple. Second, it could mean that God has opened the path of access between God and people. The book of Hebrews develops this idea and suggests that now there is nothing that separates God from God's people. But because of the timing of these events, we might think that Luke is really suggesting that the tearing of the temple curtain means that Jesus is now leaving his earthy abode and is entering into the joy of his master, Jesus' heavenly father. I say this because Jesus now utters his seventh and final word from the cross: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." After Jesus said this, Luke tells us that "he breathed his last." Please note that according to Luke Jesus' last words are

these:

- 1) Luke 23:34 “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”
- 2) Luke 23:43 “Today you will be with me in paradise.”
- 3) Luke 23:46 “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

Missing from Luke’s account is Mark’s and Matthew’s cry of lament from the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Luke’s report of the Jesus’ crucifixion is noteworthy because Jesus seems composed to the end. Jesus utters this last prayer to God and then Jesus exhales a final earthly breath.

Jesus’ prayer reflects the trust he has in his heavenly father and Jesus’ own willingness now to trust everything he was and is and will be to the care and compassion of God. It is a fitting last word. When all is said and done, none of us really control our life or our destiny. Our life is always, despite all our concocted evidence to the contrary, in God’s hands from beginning to end. As God gives us our first breath, God too will be present for our last. The only thing we have when we think we have control is a handful and head full of illusion. What a chimera [or fantasy]! Bruce Larson tells how he helped people struggling to surrender their lives to Christ:

For many years I worked in New York City and counseled at my office any number of people who were wrestling with this yes-or-no decision. Often I would suggest they walk with me from my office down to the RCA Building on Fifth Avenue. In the entrance of that building is a gigantic statue of Atlas, a beautifully proportioned athlete who, with all his muscles straining, is holding the world upon his shoulders. There he is, the most powerfully built man in the world, and he can barely stand up under this burden. ‘Now that’s one way to live,’ I would point out to my client, ‘trying to carry the world on your shoulders. But now come across the street with me.’

“On the other side of Fifth Avenue is Saint Patrick’s Cathedral, and there behind the high



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altar is a little shrine of the boy Jesus, perhaps eight or nine years old, and with no effort he is holding the world in one hand. My point was illustrated graphically.”

“We have a choice. We can carry the world on our shoulders, or we can say, ‘I give up, Lord; here’s my life. I give you my world, the whole world’ ” (Bruce Larson, Believe and Belong, Power Books (1982)).

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