

**INTRODUCTION TO THE THEME OF OUR GOOD FRIDAY MEDITATIONS:
THE LONG ROAD TO THE CROSS**

We have not gotten rid of our usual Good Friday Tenebrae service. It will be back next year. This evening's service follows a concept similar to the Lessons and Carols of our traditional Christmas Eve service.

This Good Friday we look not only at the cross and the details of Good Friday, but also at the road that led to the cross. We look back on the road, not merely weeks and months before Good Friday – though that could be of value—nor just the events of Jesus' life that led to Good Friday. We back up and admire a wide-angle view of God's plan of salvation. It's not a last minute slap-dash operation, but a carefully thought out plan, brought to fruition after thousands of years of planning, preparation and implementation. This evening we map out major points of The Long Road to the Cross. We begin our admiration of God's great plan for our salvation in the song, The Power of the Cross.

Choir.....The Power of the Cross
sung by the choir (1-3) and congregation (4) as in the bulletin

HEAVEN ON EARTH

First Scripture and Meditation..... Genesis 2:8-9,15-17

⁸Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. ⁹And the LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil... ¹⁵The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. ¹⁶And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; ¹⁷but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.”

One question goes this way: “Why did God have to put that tree in the middle of the garden?” It’s a reasonable question. But I don’t have the answer. I think only God knows and everyone else is just guessing.

I would ask you to consider this: God created Adam and Eve for fellowship with God. But any friendship requires space for each to contribute to the relationship. God had provided so much to Adam and Eve. He had created, literally, an entire universe for them! No sin, sorrow or sickness. Plus a truly free will that could decline any temptation to sin. Their contribution could be to simply show their respect for God by not doing one thing. That’s how they were to show that they respected him.

That’s how God designed it to be. Perfect. No shadow of sin. Leave the questions alone. Let heaven on earth be what God designed it to be: heaven on earth.

Hymn..... The Tree of Life, Hymn 754:1 & 2
sung by the congregation as in the bulletin

THE DISASTER OF OUR OWN MAKING

Second Scripture and Meditation.....Genesis 3:1,6-13

¹Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’”... ⁶When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. ⁷Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. ⁸Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. ⁹But the LORD God called to the man, “Where are you?” ¹⁰He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.” ¹¹And he said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?” ¹²The man said, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.” ¹³Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”

Sometimes I see news stories of wicked, perverted, hateful people and deeds too terrible to repeat in public. I see them and wonder, “That is beyond evil! How could he have done that!” I must always remember that only God’s grace has kept me from such shameful sins. Yet I still see those stories and wonder.

Not this one. While we make no excuses for mass murderers, we have all internally made excuses for Adam and Eve – “Come on, it was only one piece of fruit.” “But Satan tricked them.” “Couldn’t God just give them a warning, a freebie?” The fact that we have made excuses for them, shows our how sinful we are! Even asking why God put that tree in the garden is actually finding fault with God! We instinctively side with Adam and Eve because we can remember ourselves desiring the forbidden. We know the wickedness we have done, which we hope never comes to light.

But God had plainly stated his requirement (and made it simple too!) God had made the punishment clear. God had given them the ability to not sin. What more could he have done? Yet our forebears went barreling through all the guardrails. Then after it all, they stood before God like drunk drivers after a failed breathalyzer test making excuses, insulting the cops and calling a lawyer. “You’ll never make this stick!”

The wages of sin is death. Instead of making excuses, we should repeat the Apostle Paul’s words, “Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

Hymn.....In Adam We Have All Been One, 396:1-3, sung by cong. from the hymnal

THE PROMISE OF A DELIVERER

Third Scripture and MeditationGenesis 3:14-15

¹⁴So the LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, Cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. ¹⁵And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”

Indeed, who will rescue us from this body of death? After God silenced Adam and Eve’s excuses, after he pronounced the sentence of a life of hardship ending in the futility of death, God provides hope. A right relationship through obedience proved to be impossible, even for perfect people. So God provides another way.

God promises a deliverer, a Savior. There will be one, one born of a woman, who will destroy Satan and reverse sin’s curse. It will not be Adam or Eve. They could not do it. It will be Another who will crush Satan’s head. However, listening carefully tells us that suffering must be part of that deliverance. It is laid out in the words, “And you (Satan) will strike his heel.” A deliverer would come, but not without cost to him.

Choir There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood, sung by choir, lyrics hymn 112:1,4,5

God made his promise of a Savior in Genesis 3. But he did not leave it at a single obscure passage. God clarified his promise and multiplied prophecies and pictures. Through his prophets, God explained how the promised Savior would save his people from sin—it would be beautiful, but it wouldn't be pretty. We will hear two examples from the Old Testament. There are many others that we could have read. We could have read about the Passover Lamb in Exodus, or the 53rd chapter of Isaiah. But these are the two chosen for today.

The second reading, Psalm 22, foreshadows the circumstances of the Savior's death—that he would die righteous, yet in great suffering. It so closely matches Jesus' death that the Gospels refer to it several times, and Jesus himself quotes it from the cross. The Israelites would have sung this psalm, and we will too.

The first, Leviticus 16, is a little bit complicated. It describes part of the Israelites' annual celebration of the Great Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). In it God demonstrated that even his beloved people cannot come near to him without atonement for their sin, and that atonement can be achieved only through the shedding of blood. It is a prophecy of the Messiah, and his death.

Thus in both word and song God's people for centuries had portraits of a suffering Savior before their eyes.

A PORTRAIT OF THE FUTURE DELIVERER

Fourth Scripture and Meditation Leviticus 16:11-22

¹¹“Aaron [the priest] shall bring the bull for his own sin offering to make atonement for himself and his household, and he is to slaughter the bull for his own sin offering. ¹²He is to take a censer full of burning coals from the altar before the LORD and two handfuls of finely ground fragrant incense and take them behind the curtain. ¹³He is to put the incense on the fire before the LORD, and the smoke of the incense will conceal the atonement cover above the Testimony, so that he will not die. ¹⁴He is to take some of the bull's blood and with his finger sprinkle it on the front of the atonement cover; then he shall sprinkle some of it with his finger seven times before the atonement cover.

¹⁵“He shall then slaughter the goat for the sin offering for the people and take its blood behind the curtain and do with it as he did with the bull's blood: He shall sprinkle it on the atonement cover and in front of it. ¹⁶In this way he will make atonement for the Most Holy Place because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been. He is to do the same for the Tent of Meeting, which is among them in the midst of their uncleanness. ¹⁷No one is to be in the Tent of Meeting from the time Aaron goes in to make atonement in the Most

Holy Place until he comes out, having made atonement for himself, his household and the whole community of Israel.

¹⁸“Then he shall come out to the altar that is before the LORD and make atonement for it. He shall take some of the bull’s blood and some of the goat’s blood and put it on all the horns of the altar. ¹⁹He shall sprinkle some of the blood on it with his finger seven times to cleanse it and to consecrate it from the uncleanness of the Israelites.

²⁰“When Aaron has finished making atonement for the Most Holy Place, the Tent of Meeting and the altar, he shall bring forward the live goat. ²¹He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—and put them on the goat’s head. He shall send the goat away into the desert in the care of a man appointed for the task. ²²The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place; and the man shall release it in the desert.

The singing response to this reading is the next portion of Scripture, Psalm 22

ANOTHER PORTRAIT OF THE PROMISED DELIVERER

Fifth Scripture and Hymn..... Psalm 22 as in bulletin, cong. joins in 2nd & 3rd refrains

SENT IN THE FULLNESS OF TIME

Sixth Scripture and MeditationMatthew 1:18-21

¹⁸This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. ²⁰But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

Christmas is a time of joy. It should be. The long-awaited gift is finally given. A Savior has come! “He will save his people from their sins,” said the angel. Yet in light of our readings from Leviticus and Psalms, there is a sting in these words of hope. Yes, “He will save his people from their sins,” but God’s word also teaches, “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.” (Hebrews 9:22) The promised Savior was born to die.

If it seems strange to read a Christmas reading on Good Friday, just wait. We are going to sing a Christmas song. When we get to verse two, we realize that the Christmas story is not the end of the road, but the first step of the most important leg of the journey.

Choir..... What Child Is This, Hymn 67:1-2
sung by the congregation from the hymnal

We fast-forward through the thirty-plus years of Jesus' life, to the last day of his life.

ALONE AND WILLING

Seventh Scripture and MeditationMatthew 26:36-45

³⁶Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." ³⁷He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. ³⁸Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." ³⁹Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." ⁴⁰Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. ⁴¹"Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak." ⁴²He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done." ⁴³When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. ⁴⁴So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing. ⁴⁵Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners."

Jesus lived his 33 years perfectly, to fulfill God's law in our place. Thirty-three years of never giving in to temptation, never letting a stray thought get away from him into the brambles of greed, lust or resentment. What self-control! What love for us! That was one half of his job. And dare I say it, it was the easier half. Never in his thirty-three years of obedience do we hear Jesus plead, "Father, take this from me!"

Now remains the other half of Jesus' work, concentrated in the last twenty-four hours of life. Time to pay for our sins. In an evening moment of solitude in a place called Gethsemane, Jesus faces the punishing payment for our sins. Now Jesus cries out, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me." While his prayer is such, and he repeats it at least two more times, it is never an unwillingness to save us. Each of the three pleadings ends with the sentence, "Yet not as I will, but as you will."

When we get to the final reading, remember what Jesus prayed in Gethsemane. The death we see on the cross is only a small part of the agony that Christ endured, abandoned by the Father, so that our sins might be paid for. It is a blow taken for us, a blow so great that even the Son of God asked if there were not another way!

Hymn The Garden of Gethsemane
Sung by the choir

THE DEATH OF JESUS

Final Scripture and Meditation John 19:17-30

¹⁷Carrying his own cross, [Jesus] went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha). ¹⁸Here they crucified him, and with him two others—one on each side and Jesus in the middle. ¹⁹Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS. ²⁰Many of the Jews read this sign, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the sign was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek. ²¹The chief priests of the Jews protested to Pilate, “Do not write ‘The King of the Jews,’ but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews.” ²²Pilate answered, “What I have written, I have written.” ²³When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. ²⁴“Let’s not tear it,” they said to one another. “Let’s decide by lot who will get it.” This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled which said, “They divided my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.” So this is what the soldiers did. ²⁵Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, “Dear woman, here is your son,” ²⁷and to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

²⁸Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, “I am thirsty.” ²⁹A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus’ lips. ³⁰When he had received the drink, Jesus said, “It is finished.” With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

It IS finished. Thank you, Jesus!

Hymn.....Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted, Hymn 127
sung by the congregation as in the hymnal

Having walked the long road to the cross, to witness what Christ did for us there, let us listen to one more prophecy about the Savior, from Isaiah 53: “It was the LORD’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering... after the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life.” (vs. 10-11)

[A candle is lit.]