

April 10, 2020

Good Friday, 2020

“Into Your Hands”

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Again, Jesus called out aloud, “Father into Your hands I entrust My spirit. Just then the curtain in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom, the earth was shaken, the rocks were split, the graves were opened, and many bodies of the holy people who had gone to their rest came back to life. They came out of the graves after He had risen, went into the holy city, and showed themselves to many people.

Dear Friends in Christ,

Tonight, I invite you to come one more time to your Savior’s cross and to fix your eyes on Jesus who was one with us in His life, and not He is one with us in our death. For a time, he was right alongside of us, he was hungry and thirsty along with the rest of us, he was working and tired and sleeping along with the rest of us, he was laughing and crying and everything in between along with the rest of us, and now he commends his soul into the safekeeping of his Father. His head drops down just like ours will someday, his cheeks and lips turn pale, his eyes lose their luster, his hands and feet turn cold, when he is taken down from the cross, he drops into the arms of those who carry him away. The Son of God who is the very author of all things living, is dead.

Come one more time to this cross, now empty. Come with the death of your loved ones in mind, come with the memories of all of the death beds at which you have been present, come with memories of all the funerals you have attended, come with memories of all of the cemeteries at which you have stood, come with your own inevitable death in mind tonight, and listen to the words you may have heard one or more times at the gravesite of a loved one.

We now commit the body of our loved one to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him to subdue all things to himself.

And then the pastor places his hand on the casket, similar to a pastor placing his hand on an infant in the liturgy of Baptism and the praying of the Lord’s Prayer, “May God the Father, who created this body, may God the Son who by his blood redeemed this body, may God the Holy Spirit who by Holy Baptism sanctified this body to be his temple, keep these remains to the day of the resurrection of all flesh.

As we hear Jesus commending himself into the hands of his father, we take note that this was God’s plan. You and I were born to live, Jesus was born to die. Again and again Jesus looked into his disciples eyes and told them, “I must suffer at the hands of men and die.” Three meditations on the death of Jesus tonight.

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Meditation #1 is that the death of Jesus was a death that he wanted. Meditation #2 is that his death was a homecoming. Meditation #3 is that the death of Jesus gives us a new way of dying.

Meditation #1 is that the death of Jesus was a death that he wanted. We die because we have to die when our strength is gone, and our hearts stop beating. We may want to live longer, but we can't add a minute to our life. If I've heard it once, I've heard it dozens of times and have said it myself, “When your time is up, it's up.” Again and again we stare death in the face totally helpless.

Outwardly Jesus seemed as helpless as we are. He hung there as the victim of his enemies. They mocked and they joked that in spite of his claim of saving others, he couldn't save himself. Jesus had already showed the soldiers that they had no power over him. In the Garden, when Jesus said, “I am He,” they all fell back on the ground. Jesus could have called on 70,000 angels to help him. The reason Jesus died wasn't because the soldiers had tortured and crucified him. Not at all.

Jesus died because he loved us and wanted to take our place under the demands of the law. He died because he wanted for his Father never to be angry again with those who were believing and baptized into the Name of the Triune God. He died because he wanted our sins to be forgiven and he wanted for our mansions in heaven to be prepared. It was for the joy that was set before him, the joy of you and me and millions of people from all the nations and all the generations to be living with him face to face in paradise.

The kingdom of God is like an elderly woman sitting alone in these days and in her worst moments, she wonders if anyone really cares for her. She spends some time at the cross of her Savior, and as she does, her Savior loves her, he holds her close, she whispers out loud with St. Paul, For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

Meditation #2 is that the death of Jesus was a homecoming. In our church we believe that when a Christian dies, his soul goes into the presence of Christ, and his body goes wherever his family and the funeral director place it. We believe that our souls never die, and that our bodies will be sleeping and waiting for the Second Coming of Christ, on which day their bodies and souls will be reunited, public judgment will take place, Christ will point to our good works as evidence of faith, and then the words we've been waiting for, “Come you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”

To the thief on the cross, Jesus had promised, today you will be with me in paradise. To those of us wondering what paradise will be like, we know that it will be like the best of homecomings we've ever experienced here on earth times a thousand times 10,000. In that place there will be no more hunger and no more thirst, but instead a wedding reception that

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never really ends. No more scorching heat nor brutally cold winters nor nightmares in the darkness, rather we will be led into green pastures and beside the still waters. Sun nor moon are necessary, Christ will be all the light we need. No more nursing homes nor hospitals nor cemeteries, no more talk of protective masks and ventilators, only gold streets with a river clear as crystal going down the middle, with lush vegetation in all the seasons.

The kingdom of God is like a young family returning home from a long planned and much anticipated vacation. Along the way there were irritating detours, there were bumps and bruises galore, reservations were cancelled, tempers were short, the ride home was brutal. Pulling into the driveway, they breathed a sigh of relief, they said a prayer of thanksgiving, they settled into their beds that night, and the final thought before they drifted off was this one, “all’s well that ends well.”

Meditation #3 is that the death of Jesus gives us a new way of dying. There’s death in the air these days. This weekend may well be the high mark of Americans breathing their last, in terms of Covid 19. I was wondering how many people die every year, and it didn’t take me long to discover that worldwide, 57 million people die every year, that’s 156,164 every day. 2.7 million people die in the United States every year, that’s 7,397 every day. 41,854 die in Minnesota every year, that’s 115 people dying every day.

Then I wondered how many people claim to be Christians these days. According to Pew Research 31% of this world’s 7.3 billion are Christians, 71% of USA citizens claim Christianity, 74 % Minnesotans, and in case you’re wondering, 77% of North Dakotans!

This evening, we keep in our prayers all who are approaching death and all who are dying in these days. We pray that God’s Spirit would work through all circumstances of life, including pandemics, to be calling and gathering more and more redeemed sinners into his church. We rejoice that Jesus gives us a new way of dying. When he cried out with a loud voice for his father to receive his spirit, he was unafraid. He was not stepping blindly into a dreadful unknown. He was not jumping off a cliff into the dark abyss below. He was looking death in the eye and he was not flinching. Every good work ordained for him to do before the foundation of the world was done. Mission accomplished. He could rest in peace knowing that his good works would follow him.

The kingdom of God is like little groups of Christians gathered around the world in these days, at the foot of the cross. They know that when their time comes the dreadful reality of death will give way to a sleep. Like a little boy I know well who used to fall asleep in the car on the way home late at night after visiting relatives. His strong father would park the car, he would lift his sleeping son, carry him up into the bedroom of their little farmhouse, and lay him down for the night

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And more often than not, his mom would pray with a voice as gentle as they come, the Lord’s Prayer. And then Luther’s Evening Prayer including the words, *For into your hands I commend myself, my body and soul and all things. Let your holy angel be with me, that the evil for may have no power over me.*

And then *Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray thee Lord my soul to keep. Guard me through the starry night. Waken me at morning’s light. And if I die before I wake, I pray thee Lord my soul to take. This I ask for Jesus’ sake.*

Into your hands, dear Father, we commit our spirits. Amen.