

In the name of Jesus, the Lamb of God, our crucified King, who takes away the sin of the world.
Amen.

His hour had come. A perfect storm formed to bring about this very moment. Though it troubled His soul, Jesus declared, “For this purpose I have come to this hour... Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”¹ John records two previous occasions on which Jesus was threatened, but we were left in suspense because, as John tells us, “His hour had not yet come.”² Now, at the moment of this perfect storm, when history had led to the convergence of Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem, the convergence of life and death, light and darkness, good and evil, Jesus’ hour had come. For the sake of humanity, for the sake of creation, for the sake of His Father’s will, Jesus steps into the breach of annihilation, fully prepared for the violent winds of human torture, the relentless rains of ultimate injustice, and the threatening darkness of the Father’s scorn.

What we observe on this night is central to our existence. The events of that Friday, nearly two thousand years ago, continue to reverberate into our present with the force of mournful cries. If we had to select the most tragic figure of the Bible, it would have to be God. He is the one who witnessed the disobedience and destruction of His beloved humanity, heard the blood of Abel crying out, saw the heart of man bend toward wickedness, and was grieved in His heart over what man had become. When God saw that the condition of humanity had reached a certain level of corruption, He knew something had to change. So, He sent forth a flood, in effect starting over again, this time with Noah and his sons, and a covenant for all of humanity, that the earth would never face such a flood again.

Later, God made a new covenant with Abraham, sealed in the blood of circumcision. Then, a covenant was made with Israel upon the exodus from Egypt, at Sinai, when God gave Israel the Ten Commandments. The rite of Passover is connected to the liberation of the people from Egypt and their crossing of the Red Sea. It was a bloody affair, not just that original Passover, but also the feast which took place at the time of Jesus. The Jewish historian, Josephus, estimated that 256,000 sheep were slaughtered in the Temple in one year at Passover.³ After being slaughtered, they were skewered with a stick in a cruciform manner, front hooves pinned out to the sides, so they could be carried to the place where the feast would be observed. The signs of Jesus’ impending death would have been vivid, bloody, and prevalent. One can imagine that the events of the day -- the slaughter of the sheep, the parade of death through the streets -- would have had the effect of increasing the distress of Christ as He prepared for His violent coronation. And finally, after celebrating the Passover and establishing the new covenant in His own blood, Christ would undergo the horrific transition from Son of Man to the condemned sinner, taking humanity’s place in being forsaken by God.

¹ John 12:27-32

² John 7:30; John 8:20

³ Flavius Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*. (6.9.3)

Arrested, beaten, scourged, mocked, paraded before the rabble who called for His crucifixion, put on trial with a shrewd political leader as judge, condemned to die as a blasphemer, marched through the streets of the city He shed tears over, led to the place of public disgrace, His hands and feet pierced, pinned to the cross, left exposed, and naked in shame for all to behold. Blood poured from His sacred flesh. Innocent blood shed on behalf of all of creation sanctified the crude and tortuous cross, making it a most sacred altar as the lamb was slain to take away the sins of the world. Yet, from the cross, He does what He came to do. He pleads on man's behalf.

“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”⁴ They didn't know. If there is one verse that should give us pause, one verse that should shake our confidence in ourselves, one verse that should have us work out our salvation in fear and trembling, it is this verse. Many of those who were participating in the crucifixion were convinced they had it right. They were convinced that they were acting in accord with the will of God. Whether Roman or Jew, they were doing what they believed to be necessary, if not good. They were actually there, and they didn't know what they were doing. The same reality presents itself to us today. We have to make decisions, trusting that we are doing what God wills, but we don't always know God's will for certain. It is easy for us to pretend that our reactions to Jesus would have been different, that we would have been bold in our support for Him, and that we would have known better. The church is full of puffed-up Peters. Rather than beating our drums about the righteousness of a cause, rather than thumping our chests about the way we demonstrate our faith, perhaps we should exercise humility before God and each other. For any decision made by a Christian is made in Christian liberty, and is wholly dependent on the sufficiency of God's grace to overcome our moral failing. We do not always know what we are doing, but we rely on the intercession of Christ for our forgiveness.

Not only are we no better than those who were crucifying Christ; we are worse, for we knowingly do wrong. Have we not turned our backs on the One we know to be Christ? Those moments of uncalled for harshness toward one's spouse, parents, co-workers, or children, that judgmental glance at the person you saw in a bad position, the easily hidden sins of drunkenness or illicit lusting, and every base expression of an evil heart serve to remind us that our sense of self-righteousness is unwarranted. There is no better time than now to ask ourselves how we have been like Israel, chasing after false gods, exploiting those around us for our own ends, prioritizing the vain things of the world above sitting at our Lord's feet, treating fellow members of the Body of Christ as heretics, and the list could go on ad infinitum. “Every drive wants to be master”⁵ and sometimes, in a knowingly vicious way, you allow your desires to go for a joy ride, wreaking havoc on the pathways of your soul, leaving behind wreckage and pain, even in the lives of those you love. There is no better time than now to repent from such sinful actions and attitudes, and make a renewed effort to walk in the way of Christ, to walk in the way of humility, service, obedience to the Father, to walk in the way of His cross. We can begin by forgiving each other for whatever harms we have done, for a genuinely repentant heart will also be a forgiving heart. How can we continue to call ourselves Christians and fail to recognize our own need to change, or seek help if we cannot change on our own?

The life, death, and resurrection of Christ is entirely about something needing to change. If God were simply disinterested, a Being with no stake in the outcome of creation, then perhaps humanity would have been left to flounder until we destroyed ourselves. What we see in Jesus,

⁴ Luke 23:34

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Part 1: Section 6.

however, is God's yes to humanity and God's no. There was no way for the God who grieved over humanity at the time of Noah to turn His back on mankind for all time. God's no to humanity is a rejection of the status quo of every age. Far from an unachievable idealism, the new way of being for man is to exist in a sinful and ugly place and to redeem it with beautiful thoughts, words, and works. This is accomplished by the God made Man in Jesus, and we have only to follow in the Way, reflecting His love for us toward others. The dying Christ on the cross is the ultimate no to humanity, a rejection of the self-direction of man merely following his own will, veering off into a horizonless future, a worldless world, a truthless existence, and a hopeless void.

It might be tempting to diminish the significance of Christ, who in His willing obedience to the Father, came to sacrifice Himself for us. However, there was more at work in His death than a simplistic exchange; the one righteous for the many unrighteous. A utilitarian calculation fails to capture the reality of this action. All of creation was at stake in this apocalyptic battle between life and death. The Word, through which all of creation was brought into being and by which all of creation is upheld against the threatening void, was snuffed out in that convergent storm at the cross. At His final word -- "It is finished." -- all of creation was threatened with slipping back into nothingness. Chaos was returning to the universe as the sun became dark in the middle of the afternoon and the earth quaked. Viewed in this way, the death and resurrection became the defining moment of all of creation because, in that moment, all of creation was risked, including the incarnate Word. It is an unusual thing to think of God having to have faith in Himself. Of course, God knew the plan He put in place for man's salvation. But given the wickedness of man, there was some reason for doubt - humanly speaking. When Christ breathed His last, God turned away from that incarnate Word, let Him die, and thereby, momentarily, turned away from creation. Creation itself then started to come undone.

We must remember how ugly is the way in which we spoil both creation and ourselves, and how beautiful is the way in which God restores.⁶ The sacrifice of His Son was God's ultimate yes to creation, to all of creation, because in Christ's death and resurrection, all of it is restored. When His hour had come, Christ battled the forces of darkness with the light of love and mercy. Grace and peace conquered death and war, put to flight chaos and evil. Life and death contended, and life won. God's yes to creation and the victory of Christ is a yes to you. That anything exists at all in this moment is a certain yes to your value. Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this; to lay down his life for his friends." Your friend loves you in an ideal way, a beautiful way, and He laid down His life for you. And as He has taken up His life again to rule over death and creation, you no longer have anything to fear. You can live your life in Christian liberty, set free from slavery.

The Father risked the Son so that your future would not be left to chance. Jesus declared, "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself."⁷ He was lifted from the earth in His crucifixion, and He has drawn you through the waters of baptism into His recreative work. At the baptismal font, you were born again, and you have gained life in Him. And you know what? You know what you are doing here. You are here because you know that here the words of eternal life are proclaimed, that here the forgiveness of sins is made tangible for you in the Lord's Supper, and that here reconciliation, redemption, and restoration are real and happening, even now. You live in Christian liberty because this truth sets you free, free to serve your God and your neighbor in Christ-like love. We are changed here, conformed to the image of the crucified Christ.

⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux), p. 407.

⁷ John 12:32

He calls to you with the words, “All beautiful you are, my darling, there is no flaw in you.”⁸
Renewed by His precious blood, let us embrace Him here in His crucifixion, for He is beautiful in our eyes. Let us embrace Him as He embraces us and serves us at His own table.

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

⁸ Song of Songs 4:7