

Friday

Today is Good Friday. Its very name raises questions. How could a day filled marked by an unjust trial, torture, and execution be good? Hopefully, we will answer that question by the end, but to start with, we must be willing to ponder the true awfulness of this day. And today's devotional is long. It's long because there is so much written about it in all four gospels, and so many little details that you miss if you only read one gospel account. So, if reading this feels a bit tedious, use that feeling to remember how tediously long this day was for Jesus. He suffered long hours this day because of his unstoppable love for us.

There really is no clear definition between the end of Thursday and the beginning of Friday in the gospels. Jesus was awake all night, and so we pick up the story directly where we left off yesterday. After Jesus prayed in anguish for his Father to strengthen him to accomplish his will, he roused his sleepy disciples, this time warning them that the time had come, and he was about to be arrested. The dark, still night that had made them so sleepy was suddenly disrupted by the crackling of vegetation, thuds of footsteps on the ground, and the approach of an ominous orange flickering glow- lights from burning torches and lanterns. An armed crowd has arrived, along with the chief priests and elders. Judas, their own companion, appears out of the darkness and gives Jesus the greeting of a close friend- a kiss. Jesus acknowledges the falsehood in that action, saying, *"Friend, do what you came for"* (Matt 26:50).

A brief skirmish between the disciples and the soldiers ensues, and Jesus' disciples hastily jump up to defend him, a wild swing of Peter's sword cutting the off the ear of one of the men in the armed crowd. Despite Jesus clearly telling the disciples so many times that he was destined to die this week, the disciples are not content to let it happen without a fight. So, Jesus quickly heals the man's ear, and then says something that stops them cold. *"Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen this way"* (Matt 26:54)?

It's almost like he is saying to his disciples, "Don't you think all this time I spent praying tonight could have been used to save myself? But instead, I've prayed that the Father's will be done, and this is the Father's will- can't you see it?"

The disciples, still struggling to understand the purpose of Jesus' willing sacrifice, realize that he intends to give himself over to the guards. And as Jesus quietly allows himself to be bound with ropes, they flee to avoid capture. It is thought that the gospel writer, Mark, though anonymous, inserts himself in the story here, as a youth who fled away naked after one of the guards grabbed his linen garment. Once the crowd heads back towards the city with Jesus, two of the disciples, Peter and John, follow closely behind to the first place he is interrogated- the house of

Caiaphas, the high priest. Apparently, John knew Caiaphas well enough to be allowed to enter the house with Jesus, while Peter was left standing outside. Eventually, John arranges for Peter to be let in.

It is the coldest, darkest part of the night, in early Spring, when most people would be inside their warm houses and under blankets. To stay warm, a fire is kindled in the courtyard, and Peter warms himself near it, along with all the other people who have decided Jesus' trial is worth staying up all night for. Unfortunately for Peter, this means people are drawing near enough in the firelight to recognize him. As the night goes on, three people ask Peter if he is one of Jesus' disciples. The third person to ask is a relative of the man whose ear Peter cut off! All three times, Peter vehemently denies knowing Jesus, and as he utters the last word of his third denial, a rooster begins to crow, indicating that dawn is near, and that Jesus' prediction had come true. Peter instantly remembers his promise to die for Jesus rather than deny him, and he is so full of grief and regret that *"he went outside and wept bitterly"* (Luke 22:62).

The trial in front of the Sanhedrin, at the home of Caiaphas, is a mock trial. Many witnesses are brought in to give false testimonies about Jesus, but Mark points out that their stories did not agree with each other. Jesus refuses to defend himself against the false accusations, and no witnesses are brought in to defend Jesus. Eventually, Caiaphas appears frustrated, and uses an oath to legally force Jesus to answer his question, *"Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God"* (Matt 26:63).

Jesus answers, *"I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven"* (Mark 14:62).

In a mix of relief that Jesus has finally said something by which they can condemn him, and anger that he would dare to call himself the Son of God, the high priest tears his clothes, calls this blasphemy, and declares that Jesus is worthy of death. At this point, the witnesses of the trial spend the rest of the night mistreating Jesus, spitting at him, striking him in the face while he is blindfolded, and the guards beat him.

At daybreak, which might have been around 6 the morning, the Jews lead Jesus, still bound like a criminal, to the palace of the Roman Governor, Pilate. As Jesus is being led to the palace, Judas sees Jesus and realizes that he has been condemned to death, and is overcome with remorse. It makes me wonder, did he hope that Jesus would use his miraculous power to free himself, leaving Judas to get away with the 30 pieces of silver? Or did he think that Jesus being put to death would not bother him like it actually did? Whatever was going on in Judas' mind, he was not ready for the extreme remorse he felt after seeing Jesus' beaten face and bound hands. Judas runs to the temple, finds the chief priests, and confesses that he has sinned by betraying an innocent man. He tries to shove the 30 coins of silver into their hands, but they

won't take it. Instead of offering Judas any advice or comfort, the chief priests shrug their shoulders and say, *"What is that to us? That's your responsibility"* (Matt 27:4). So, Judas throws the coins into the temple and runs out. Sadly, Judas is so torn up with guilt that he quickly finds a place to end his life, and hangs himself. Once the priests realize what has happened, they use the "blood money" that Judas threw in the temple to buy the field in which Judas died- the Potter's Field. In doing this, the chief priests unwittingly fulfill more prophecies, that can be found in Zechariah and Jeremiah.

Now Jesus has arrived at the palace, and Pilate does several rounds of interrogation with Jesus. The Jews are worried about avoiding the ceremonial uncleanness caused by entering the house of a Gentile, which would prevent them from finishing celebrating the Passover, and so they cannot come into the palace. Pilate is forced to do several trips outside his palace to talk with the Jews about Jesus. The irony is thick. The Jews are carefully staying out of the palace to keep from breaking one of their religious laws. At the same time, they are calling for the execution of the Son of the God, the God who they are supposedly serving by staying outside!

Hoping to arouse the suspicion that Jesus could be a dangerous political enemy, the Jews have accused Jesus of subverting their nation, telling people not to pay their taxes, and of trying to become their king. Did they not remember that Jesus could have seized power to become that sort of king last Sunday, but rather rode into their city on a donkey's colt? To get to the bottom of this accusation, Pilate simply asks Jesus if he is king of the Jews. The four gospels are all clear that Jesus answers, *"Yes,"* to this question, but John gives us Jesus' full answer. He says, *"My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place."*

Pilate replies, *"You are a king then!"*

Jesus answers, *"You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."* (John 18:36-37)

Pilate mutters in frustration, *"What is truth?"* and walks out to talk again with the Jews. In the process of telling them that he sees no basis for a charge worthy of death, he learns that Jesus comes from Galilee. A glimmer of hope returns to Pilate he realizes maybe someone else could take the responsibility for making this life-or-death decision about Jesus. If Jesus is from Galilee, he is under Herod's jurisdiction, and Herod happens to be in town today. So, the whole procession moves off again, Jesus, the guards, and the chief priests, now go to see Herod.

Herod seems very pleased to meet Jesus, in the way one would be pleased to meet a great magician in hopes he would perform a trick. Herod asks Jesus question after question, but Jesus refuses to answer at all. The chief priests continue to hurl accusations at Jesus, and Jesus'

silence leads Herod to allow his soldiers to make a mockery of Jesus, dressing him in a royal robe, before sending him back to Pilate.

The procession of Jesus and his accusers go back to Pilate once more. Pilate now hopes he can placate the crowd by just punishing Jesus for his supposed crimes. Jesus is flogged, and a crown of thorns pressed on his head to match his royal robe from Herod. Pilate brings Jesus out for the Jews to see the results of the cruel beating, and tries to convince them that releasing him would go along with their tradition of receiving back a Jewish prisoner during the Passover Feast. But they yell, "*Crucify! Crucify!*" Pilate is feeling more and more torn about condemning Jesus to death. On top of the strange dream his wife had last night, warning her that Jesus was an innocent man, the Jews now tell Pilate that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God. Pilate considers all the information... could he be an innocent man, the true king of the Jews, the Son of God? And if so, what will happen to him if he condemns him to death on a cross. John writes that Pilate is afraid, and that's not a feeling that the Roman Governor is accustomed to.

Pilate takes Jesus back inside and pleads with him to give him more information, information that he could use to free him. But Jesus refuses. Pilate seems to be in disbelief as he says, "*You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you*" (John 19:10)? But Jesus holds fast, and even shows compassion towards Pilate, as he makes his difficult decision. He tries to ease his conscience by saying that the Jews who brought Jesus to him have committed the greater sin, and that all of this God's will. Many hours have passed since Jesus was arrested, and by now, there is a large crowd outside Pilate's palace, all clamoring in unison, "*Crucify him!*" Finally, seeing that the crowd will not be satisfied with anything less than the execution of Jesus, Pilate washes his hands in front of them, and says, "*I am innocent of this man's blood, it is your responsibility!*" (Matt 27:23)

The crowd replies with chilling forgetfulness of the parable that Jesus told only three days ago, where the tenants said, "*This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and the inheritance will be ours*" (Luke 20:14). But now, instead of gasping, "*May this never be!*" the angry crowd says, "*Let his blood be on us and on our children!*" (Matt 27:25)

The crowd gets what they want, and Jesus is turned over to the soldiers to be crucified. Jesus has already been up all night, beaten at Caiaphas' house, cruelly flogged at Pilate's command, and has a crown of sharp thorns piercing his head. Now, the soldiers take the mock staff that was given to Jesus as part of his kingly "wardrobe" and use it to beat him in the head, repeatedly. Once they are done with this final beating, the robe is removed and he is led away to be crucified. Jesus is made to carry his cross, which could have weighed anywhere from 40 to 150 pounds, depending on its construction. After the beatings, it is no wonder that somewhere on the road between Jerusalem and Golgatha, Jesus' body gives out, and he can no longer carry his heavy cross. A man named Simon, from Cyrene, is picked out of the crowd to

carry Jesus' cross the rest of the way. As Jesus slowly walks and stumbles down the road, a distraught crowd of women who mourn and wail follow him. Despite all his injuries and the struggle that it is just to walk, Jesus takes a moment to comfort them. He says, "*Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children*" (Luke 23:28). The king of the Jews, the Son of God is being tortured to death, and yet his concern lies not in his own comfort, but for theirs.

Finally, Jesus and the crowd following him arrive at Golgatha, meaning, the Place of the Skull, where the Romans executed their victims by crucifixion. A sign, ordered by Pilate, was made to read: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews," written in Aramaic, Latin, and Greek, and nailed to the top of the cross. Crucifixion was not just a long and painful method of killing people, it was a humiliating, shameful way to die on public display. It was saved for the worst criminals, and that is what the Jews thought of Jesus in this moment. Before the oversized nails were driven into his bones and flesh, the soldiers offer Jesus a drink that had been laced with pain killers. But Jesus refuses to drink it. The soldiers lay Jesus on the cross and callously nail his wrists and feet into cross, and raise the cross up to vertical, like a tree. On either side of him, two criminals are crucified as well, and the 3 men, in agony, wait for the only thing that will end their pain-death.

But while they wait, other things are happening at the foot of the cross. Soldiers are dividing up Jesus' clothes and drawing by lot who will take the biggest piece, fulfilling even more Old Testament prophecies. On-lookers hurl insults at Jesus and jeer at him for being able to do miracles for others, but not being able to save himself. At least one disciple is there- John. With John is Jesus' mother, Mary, amongst other women who were devoted to Jesus. Jesus again, ignoring his own pain, focuses on his mother's wellbeing. He asks John to take care of her, and we are told that from that day on, Jesus' mother lived with John.

Even the criminals crucified next to Jesus come into the story. Luke tells us that one of them joined the crowd in insulting Jesus, but that the other one stood up for Jesus, saying they were being punished justly for their crimes, but that Jesus had done no wrong. He asks Jesus if he will remember him when he comes into his kingdom. And Jesus responds, "*I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise*" (Luke 23:43).

Matthew and Luke both specify that after Jesus was raised up on the cross, darkness came over the land, because the sun stopped shining, from the 6th to the 9th hour, which is noon to 3 pm. During this time of darkness, Jesus cries out, "*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*" John, standing at the foot of the cross hears Jesus also say, "*It is finished.*" Then Jesus breathes his last breath, and dies.

At the moment of Jesus' death, the earth responds. The curtain of the temple, which separated the Most Holy Place from the Holy Place, is torn in the middle, from top to bottom. Matthew also says that there was an earthquake, that rocks split in two, and many dead were raised to life, walking out of the tomb like Lazarus had. When a Roman centurion at the foot of the cross sees these things happen at the moment of Jesus' death, he is terrified, and says, *"Surely he was the Son of God!"*

All four gospel writers tell us that Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for Jesus' body so that he could give him a proper burial. John also goes out of his way to describe how Jesus was confirmed to be dead before being taken down from the cross. A soldier pierced Jesus' side with a spear and watched the blood and water flow out. John was making sure to dispel the myth that maybe Jesus was not quite dead in the tomb, and was merely revived after a couple days of rest. But John also mentions that Joseph was joined by Nicodemus, and together they wrapped Jesus' body in linen cloths, along with 75 pounds of spices. 75 pounds was an incredibly generous quantity of spices, the amount that would have been used for burying royalty. The wealthy, yet generous men, laid his body in a nearby garden, in a tomb that had been newly cut into the rock, and a stone was rolled over the entrance. The group of women who had been at the cross followed Joseph and Nicodemus and saw where the tomb was. But as evening was drawing near, they had to go home to prepare for the Sabbath.

The long and awful day was finally over. I imagine that the disciples and the women, full of shock, grief, and disbelief, went home to try to get some sleep, but found it difficult to do so. Only a week ago, they had been at the dinner party celebrating Lazarus coming out of the grave, now Jesus was in the grave. How could this be in any way good? That Friday evening, the disciples certainly didn't understand that anything good could come out of all this tragedy. Several times, Jesus had described his death as the cup that he must drink, the cup of God's wrath, so that the rest of us would not have to drink it. We are so used to the idea of Jesus dying on the cross for our sins that I find I am often numb to the gravity of Jesus' willingness to submit to execution in my place. So I attempted to imagine another scenario, which is a feeble attempt to Jesus sacrifice in a way that helps me personalize Good Friday and renew the awe and wonder of what Jesus did for me.

Imagine if you were taken hostage by evil captors, who decided to execute you by forcing you to drink a cup of lethal poison. As they try to force it past your lips, the prisoner next you (Jesus) offers to drink it instead, if the captors will let you go free. The captors agree, and you protest, but Jesus insists, and promises it will turn out ok in the end, if you just trust him. So, Jesus drinks the poison, suffers, and dies. You are turned free and are no longer a hostage. For a day, you have survivor's guilt- a mixture of joy about being alive and free, but sadness about Jesus' death for your sake. But a couple of days later, as you're walking along, thinking over what

you've just been through, Jesus shows up and walks beside you! You gasp and wonder if he's a ghost, but he lets you touch his hands to see he is real, warm, and alive. He says, "Remember how I said it would be ok in the end? Death couldn't hold me down!" That's how personal the cross is for us. Jesus had each of us in mind as he walked the painful, dusty road to the cross, knowing he must drink the cup of God's wrath.

And though this analogy is an incomplete picture of the truly amazing reality of what Jesus did for us on the cross, I hope it highlights two reasons this Friday is good. First, Jesus took the death sentence that was meant for us. We come into the world with this death sentence, born right into a hostage situation, with sin and death as our captors. But on Good Friday, Jesus rescued the hostages and set us free, forever. The second is that even death couldn't hold on to Jesus. But we will get to celebrate that in a couple of days.

Extra Reading: Matthew 26:47- 27:66, Mark 14:32-15:47, Luke 22:47- 23:56, John 18:2-19:42