

“It is Finished”

Date: April 22, 2011

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: John 19:17-30

Theme: Crucifixion, Atonement

Occasion: Good Friday

What is *good* about Good Friday. How can anyone look at what takes place on this day and call it “good?” Jesus is arrested on false charges. He is lied about. He’s ridiculed, even spat upon. He is whipped to a bloody pulp of flesh and blood, made to drag a heavy cross beyond the point of endurance, and then he is nailed to that tree and left to die. Good? What can possibly be good about any of that?

The answer is, if we let Friday stand alone, if we isolate it from everything else that took place, it cannot be called anything other than Dark Friday, or Horrible Friday. Our Messiah-King was killed. Love was nailed to a cross. If we look only at this one day, it was a bad Friday.

But as Christians, we are privileged to know about Easter. And because of Easter, we can look back at this horrible day and see it as part of God’s plan of salvation. God redeemed Christ’s suffering and used it for good. God used this awful day to be a blessing for the human race.

In the midst of all these horrible events that take place on Good Friday, is the stirring of victory. Even before Christ is laid in the tomb, sin and evil are being defeated, kicking themselves to death. Already, the victory is certain.

When a Christian attends a Good Friday service, he or she can do so, almost with a sense of joy - because we know how the story ends. I say “almost” because we can never forget the pain the suffering of our Lord, and we must not rush to Easter too quickly. But let us not be overwhelmed with grief, because we know that Sunday is coming.

Good Friday, though, gives us a look into the heart of God. There we see One who will go to every length to win us and to make us His own. It is okay to call this day Good Friday, because underneath all of the darkness of this day, we see God at work on our behalf. Man did his worst, and then God did His best.

It is still hard, though, to fully understand what this day means. I recently ran across an image that I thought might be helpful to share with you. Actually its an ancient image, but it just came back to my awareness. The image is that of a “scapegoat.” Now, I don’t know if you know it or not, but the term *scapegoat* is rooted in biblical history.

On the day of Atonement, the high priest would prepare himself, then kill a young bull, and then go into the sacred place called the Holy of Holies. It was the place in the Temple where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. The priest would sprinkle blood from the bull on the mercy seat and on the floor. Then he would do the same thing, using a goat.

After the ceremony, the high priest would go out into the courtyard, where there would be another goat. Laying his hands on the goat, the priest would confess the sins of the people. Then, an assistant would take the goat and let it loose in the wilderness, to signify that God had removed the guilt from the Hebrew people. The sin was put onto the goat and set loose. It was not held against them any more.

Jesus Christ became our scapegoat. Our sins were placed upon him. When Jesus died on the cross, our sin was taken from us and put on Him. This was God’s doing, not ours. Jesus paid the penalty for all people, for all time. Our sin was upon Him. And by his death, he takes it away from us.

Dennis Fakes is a pastor in Ohio. He says that when he was a youth he tried to start a butterfly collection. He tells the story: “But when I caught my first

butterfly and put pins through its wings in my collection box, it did not seem right. Living things are not meant to be pinned to boxes. My collection ended with one.”

He goes on to say. “And now, when I see paintings of the crucifixion, what strikes me first is how wrong and unnatural it is to try and nail a living creature, a human being, to a tree. As I read the biblical account of Jesus being crucified, and I realize that this man was nailed there for me, on my account, I know it was wrong.”

Pastor Dennis understands. Jesus did die unjustly. He was innocent. I am guilty. It should have been me, there on that cross. It was for my sin that Jesus died. He was perfect, blameless, in every way. But we who are guilty, we go free.

But that very fact, that He alone among all the human beings who ever lived was perfect, made him the very one whose death *could* atone for our sin. After his death, no other sacrifice was ever necessary. Christ was the one, perfect sacrifice for all time. He was the scapegoat for humanity. By his death, we were all set free from sin.

Martin Luther, the German reformer, once had a dream in which he stood before the Lord on Judgment Day. Satan was there to accuse him. When the books were opened, Satan pointed to transgression after transgression of which Luther was guilty. Luther’s heart sank in despair.

Then, Luther remembered the cross. Turning to the devil he said, “There is one entry which you have not made, Satan.” “What’s that?” asked the devil.

“It is this,” answered Luther. “The blood of Jesus, God’s Son, cleanses us from all sin.” And Satan was silent. He had no answer. Oh, Satan is the great accuser, and he will remind us of all our sins. But he has no answer when we remind Him of the cross, and the fact that Jesus died there for you and me.

When I was in seminary, there was a fellow student of mine who was deaf.

Because she couldn't hear what the professors were saying in class, she had people come to class with her to interpret for her. As the professors would speak, the interpreters would use sign language to translate. It is a very graceful, almost like dancing.

It was very interesting for me to learn, that pointing to the palms of one's hands is the sign for Jesus. How appropriate that is. Of all the signs that could have been chosen for Jesus, they chose the nail-prints to symbolize who He was.

When Jesus died and breathed his last, he cried out, "It is finished." By that, he did not mean, "I've come to the end of my rope, I can't take this any more." Instead, what he meant was "I have attained the goal. I have accomplished the work that my Father has sent me to do. Salvation is won for God's people."

My friends, this is what makes Good Friday, good. Good Friday and Easter are part of the same story. The story of God overcoming our enemies, sin and death. With Christ, we too can say, "it is finished." The victory is ours. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory, through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Amen? Amen!