

SERMON THOUGHTS ABRIDGED:

Matthew 27:50-54
THE SON OF GOD

And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. Then, behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth quaked, and the rocks were split, and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the graves after His resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many.

So when the centurion and those with him, who were guarding Jesus, saw the earthquake and the things that had happened [Mark 15:39 saw that He cried out like this and breathed His last], they feared greatly saying, "Truly this was the Son of God!"

I remember our sister-in-law relating to us the time she walked along side a particular store, as she often did, in a small shopping area, and noticed a car parked, where cars usually weren't. Later when she got home, she heard on the news that that very same store was robbed that afternoon. "It must have been the get-away car I walked past!" she told us with almost a gasp. An unexpected and unnerving conclusion! In our text this evening, we are told of a similar unexpected and unnerving event at Golgotha the day Jesus' died.

The Gospels tell us that on Good Friday from noon until three there was darkness over the land, for the sun stopped shining. Let me stop there for a moment. We use the word "Gospel" in two different ways. In ONE meaning it is the opposite of the Law of God (the Ten Commandments and more), and that Law declares to us God's expectations and the punishment that awaits if we do not measure up. But opposite of that is the Gospel, the Good News, which declares to us the wonderful message that in Jesus our sins are forgiven and the punishment lifted. In a SECOND meaning, we also use the word "Gospel" to mean the four books of the Bible – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—the "Gospels" that give us the biography, the life history, of Jesus. They are called the Gospels not because there is no Law in them. Jesus often spoke Law. They are called the Gospels because the account of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is very Good News for us! One of the Scripture readings every Sunday is called the Gospel Reading, because it comes from Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John.

Back to our unexpected and unnerving circumstances. The Gospels tell us that on Good Friday from noon until three there was darkness over the land, for the sun stopped shining. At the end of the three hours, Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken me!" Remember His loud cry at Lazarus' tomb, "Lazarus, come out!" This too was such a loud cry. Then a few verses later Matthew again says, *And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit.* Such a loud voice as a crucifixion progressed was most unusual. Matthew makes it a point to record both. Crucifixion actually involved death by suffocation—not from uncontrolled bleeding, not from a wound to the heart, or to the head. The crucified person hung extended on the cross. The chest muscles became more and more fatigued. Breathing became more and more difficult. What a harsh way to die—such a gradual, painstakingly slow way to die. Suffocation. Jesus endured it for you, for your sins, because God's expectations in the Law, which you have failed to meet, demanded it. And He took it so that it would not be leveled upon your head in judgment! God's Son for you. Such a Savior.

But, as much suffering as was involved in His torturous crucifixion, Jesus did not die from asphyxiation. Our text says before He died, He cried out with a loud voice! Cried out, shouted! It's the very same word used by Mark to describe the angry crowd earlier on Good Friday shouting to Pontius Pilate, "Crucify Him!" Jesus did not have the life inched out of Him, powerless to halt death's onset. Jesus had said, as recorded in John 10, "*No man takes My life from Me. I lay it down of My own authority/power, and I take it up again. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again*" (John 10:17-18) Jesus was dying willingly, giving His life for us.

In fact our text says, Jesus *yielded up His spirit*, -- the old King James English "gave up the ghost." Jesus gave His life into death. The Greek word translated "gave" is a word which means "to send forth, to discharge, to set free, to dismiss." Jesus dismissed His soul, His life. He sent it away. It wasn't taken away. "Gave" or "send forth" is the word that is used in the Bible at times for "divorce." "Let a man not divorce his wife" (I Corinthians 7:11)—not send her away, not dismiss her. It's also used of God dismissing our sins, sending them away, forgiving them. "Blessed is the man whose sins are forgiven"—sent away (Romans 4:7). Jesus died for the express purpose of being your substitute. He could have "walked" at any time, but did not and would not.

When Jesus died, events that followed were the Father in heaven “speaking.” *The veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.* In the Temple, the Most Holy Place or Holy of Holies was separate from the Holy Place, divided by a great curtain. In the Holy Place were the table of showbread, the lampstand, the altar of incense. The great curtain divided the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. Behind the curtain originally stood the Ark of the Covenant (lost apparently during the Babylonian captivity) in which were the Ten Commandments, and on top of which was the Mercy Seat, or the Atonement Cover. On one day a year, the high priest only could enter the Most Holy Place and sprinkle the blood of a special sacrifice on the top of the Atonement Cover, procuring mercy for the people. The great curtain in the temple of Jesus’ day, was 30 feet x 30 feet. Of the thickness, we are not sure, but surely not a flimsy bedsheet type fabric. The curtain suddenly was torn from top to bottom! by God’s hand. Imagine the sound of that rending! How many blocks away did the sound carry?? All the way to Golgotha?? I don’t know. God the Father was clearly “saying” that the final sacrifice had now been offered. No longer were earthly priests and earthly sacrifices needed. Each individual, through Christ’s sacrifice of Himself, now has direct access to God. Jesus has opened the door of God’s mercy for you. Go to Him, sinner that you are, in Jesus’ name. And there find grace, mercy, and peace. Offenses forgiven.

And the earth quaked. The earth itself quaked, shook—the earth to which we anchor our homes, and churches, barns, and bridges. Here the earth itself was not stable. The holy Son of God had just given His life for unholy man. How unfair! The Earth shuddered. But how loving!--security for us.. *And the rocks were split.* The text is not just saying that individual stones split, which is quite striking at that. But stone masons who built foundations years ago, for homes and barns in Wisconsin at least, knew to split stones to produce a flat face for the wall. Here the fixed rocks split! Large ledges of rock. Imagine the crack and the sound of the shearing involved. Imagine the power. This was not a small thing that Jesus gave His life for sinners. It was tremendous.

And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the graves after His resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many. The Jewish people typically buried their dead in tombs, caves, natural or carved, in the hillsides and cliffs. Do you suppose there were tombs nearby Calvary? We know that the tomb where Jesus would be placed was not far away. Now at the death of God’s Son, the wages of sin for all the world, the wages of sin which is death, had been paid in full. God the Father clearly demonstrated that death was now defunct and broken. Many saints, the “holy ones,” the Old Testament believers who trusted in the coming promised Messiah for their peace with God, many (not all) were raised to life. Not just in spirit. Their bodies came out of the grave. In their bodies they appeared to others in Jerusalem after Jesus rose on Sunday. Did they appear only to believers in Jesus of Nazareth for their joy, or also to the enemies and unbelievers of Christ for their dread? We don’t know. Their resurrection was made possible by the impending resurrection of Christ. It was by Christ’s victory. In God’s timelessness that victory was already complete, hence these Old Testament believers rose. Did they have to go back to the grave? Or did God take them to heaven directly after some time, like He took Jesus back on Ascension Day? Perhaps.

So when the centurion and those with him, who were guarding Jesus, saw the earthquake and the things that had happened [Mark 15:39 saw that He cried out like this and breathed His last], they feared greatly, saying, “Truly this was the Son of God!” Do you see why it was such an unnerving experience and shock to the centurion and the soldiers? At length these soldiers “guarding” Jesus realized how out-manned and out-classed they were, what dangerous ground on which they stood, before the Almighty. Had He died in weakness from crucifixion? Not at all. Just a coincidence that the earth beneath their feet trembled and shook? Hardly. Just an accident that fixed rocks and rock formations split like styrofoam or pieces of dried bread? I think not. Just a quirk of nature that many graves, some near at hand surely, should simultaneously break open? Never. And this is to say nothing of the fact that the sun which had stopped shining for three hours as Jesus suffered the depths of being forsaken by the Father for our sins, should suddenly start shining again some two hours prior.

The soldiers were struck with fear. The word used for fear means “to be put to flight.” They wanted to run, for safety! They were up against something much bigger, and by all rights they should not have survived. *They feared greatly, saying, “Truly this was the Son of God!”* They got it. They had seen enough. They surely had heard about the God of the Jews. They grasped what the Jewish leaders so blindly and stubbornly refused to believe. God’s Son! We don’t know more about these men. Did they join the camp of believers? Traditions say so, at least the centurion; but we don’t know.

Today the same conclusion is ours. Surely this was—THIS IS!—the Son of God, your Savior. With all regret, repent of your sins against Him who died for you.. Humbly seek His forgiveness. He could undo you in a moment, but has already suffered in mercy for your eternal life. Honor and love Him your Redeemer, your Rescuer, and your Life—the compassionate and almighty Son of God! Nothing unnerving here.

So be it! Amen!

Pastor Kanzenbach----