

**First Presbyterian Church
Marianna, Florida
Lenten Luncheon April 3, 2012
Glory of God in the Words of Jesus from the Cross:
“It is Finished”
“Father, into Your Hands I Commit My Spirit”**

Welcome

Hymn page 23 **“Leaning on the Everlasting Arms”** *Leaning*
(stanzas 1 and 3 and refrains)

Prayer:

Leader: Jesus said, “It is finished.”

Unison: **As we hear these words of Jesus from the cross, help us, O God, to see how in Jesus love’s redeeming work has been completed.**

Leader: As we marvel at all that in love you have done for us in Jesus Christ,

Unison: **so we would pray, O God, that you will help us as we seek to share the gospel’s joyful sound with those around us.**

Leader: Jesus said, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”

Unison: **As we hear these words of Jesus from the cross, O God, help us to remember even in his suffering his complete confidence in your goodness towards him.**

Leader: As we marvel at his confident trust in your goodness towards him,

Unison: **help us, O God, to live and to die with that same confidence because of all that you have done for us in Jesus Christ, your Son, for it is in his name that we pray. Amen.**

Scripture Readings

John 19:30

Leader: When Jesus had received the wine, he said,

People: **"It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.**

Luke 23:44-49

Leader: It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said,

People: **"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."**

Leader: Having said this, he breathed his last. When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said,

People: "Certainly this man was innocent."

Lenten Meditation: The Roman Centurion reflects on the Words of Jesus from the Cross : "It Is Finished" "Father, into Your Hands I Commit My Spirit"

This certainly was no choice assignment. Here we were stuck on the far reaches of the Empire, a long way from home in Rome. It would have been bad enough if these people had just been pleased with the great "Pax Romana" that we were bringing to them. But instead of enjoying the peace and protection that being part of the Roman Empire offered to them they were constantly complaining and rebelling. If all of their motives were political it would have been hard enough to handle but they even added religion to the mix and kept talking about the fact that their God just did not want us there and that this God was going to send a leader who would drive us out. You can see why we had to be vigilant. We never knew when that next rebel leader might arise claiming to be led by God to get rid of us all. It was probably for this reason that we tended to show greater cruelty to the people of this nation than to people in other parts of the Empire. We always had that hope that a few good crucifixions and all of the attention they received would remind these rebellious people that we had power and that we meant business. Certainly it was not easy putting men to death in this cruel way but I guess someone had to do it for the sake of the Caesar. Generally I would get back with my fellow-soldiers and soon forget about what I had just done. It was after all just in a day's work. But this day has just been so different.

It was about 8:30 in the morning when Pilate gave us orders to take this Jesus of Nazareth out to that place of a Skull and crucify him. I had heard about this man. A friend stationed up there in the northern region of Galilee where he was from had told me about him. He even said that he had gone to this Jesus to try

to get him to help his servant who was seriously ill. Jesus never even touched his servant. He merely spoke a word and he was healed. My friend was convinced that the whole thing was a miracle.

My friend had shared with me the fact that this Jesus did not seem like other rebels against Rome. Messiahs, God's Anointed Ones, they liked to call themselves. This Jesus was not raising up an army to try to drive us Romans out of their country. He taught the people to love their enemies and to pray for those who harassed them, even Romans like ourselves whom they hated with a passion. He even suggested that when one of us Romans may strike one of them they should turn the other cheek towards us rather than trying to retaliate and get into a fight. I had told my friend that we could use a few more like this Jesus about whom he was speaking down here in Judea. But now he was here but being marched to the place called the Skull to be punished and crucified like some common thief after many of my men had already beaten him and bloodied him.

As I looked at him – naked, a crown of thorns pushed down by men in mockery on his brow – for the first time in a long time I truly hated my job and felt a sincere regret for what I was about to do. But, of course, I had no choice. I was under orders myself, and after all, he was only another Jew. Pushing back any semblance of compassion to the recesses of my mind, I gave the orders for them to nail him to the cross.

I watched him throughout the day, listening to the few words that he spoke. He took the abuse that was hurled at him with dignity and strength. It was as if he, with his crown, if only of cruel thorns, really was a king and we were the rebellious subjects, whose rebellion would soon be put to an end. Yet far from calling for our destruction, this king prayed for mercy and forgiveness even for us. As I said this has been a remarkable day. I have never experienced one quite like

it. I had known that these Jews were a peculiar people but this one really takes the cake.

I watched as the dark clouds rolled in at noon. It was a strange eerie feeling during those three hours of darkness in the middle of the day. It was as if the heavens themselves were proclaiming the darkness of the deeds they were witnessing. Something felt so dreadfully wrong. In part of the city there was a small earthquake and many people fled in fear, terrified that this may be a sign from God. Some people reported later that something very strange happened right in the holy place of the temple of the Jews. Not being a Jew I did not understand what they meant but it certainly seemed to make many of them wonder about what was happening.

At three o'clock this Jesus cried out that he was thirsty. I could see how he must have been getting de-hydrated. I was pleased that someone offered him some sour wine. Then he cried out, "It is finished." What a strange thing to say as he was approaching death. Even stranger was the fact that this did not sound on his lips as a weak cry of someone admitting defeat at the hands of one's enemies. It was a loud almost triumphant cry of victory, like someone who was just completing a mission. Just before he breathed his last he gathered his strength again, pulled himself up by the nails on his wrists, and said again in a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." Then he bowed his head and died. This was the most remarkable death I had ever seen and certainly with my job I had witnessed many. I stood there just looking at his limp, dead body just hanging there, and I was overwhelmed by a sense of uncertainty. What had we done? I turned to my men and said to them, "Surely this man was innocent." None of them replied but their own silence spoke volumes. Was it possible that he was who he claimed to be, the very Son of God, and I had killed him. For the first time in

many years of being in this cruel business I felt tears coming to my eyes, and I still wonder what I had done.

(Reflections based on Final Words from the Cross by Adam Hamilton, Abingdon Press, 2011, pages 101-103)

As you have heard these suggested reflections from that Roman Centurion there at the cross when Jesus died I would like to ask you to think what you would have thought and what you would have felt if you had been there when Jesus died. As you heard him cry out, “It is Finished,” would you have heard a cry of defeat or a cry of victory for a mission accomplished. Even more what do his words from that cross, “It is Finished,” mean to you today? (Time of Silence)

In the midst of their accounts of the death of Jesus Matthew and Mark and Luke all record that the curtain of the Temple was torn in two. Matthew and Mark both say that it happened just as Jesus died. Luke says it happened just before he prayed, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” The fact that three of the four Gospels include this detail is significant. The comment about what happened to a curtain may seem very much out of place in the midst of all the drama of any death let alone the death of Jesus until we remember the curtain to which reference is being made. This was the curtain in the temple that hid the Holy of Holies, the most sacred place at the center of the Temple. The Holy of Holies was considered the throne room of God. In ancient times, the Ark of the Covenant which had symbolized the presence of God with the wandering people of Israel was kept in the Holy of Holies. The Holy of Holies was so special and so sacred that no one could ever enter it except the High Priest, and he only did so one day during the year on the Day of Atonement when he went in to seek atonement and forgiveness from God for his own sins and for the sins of the people. As the curtain of the temple was torn in two it was as if the way to God’s presence was being thrown open to all, and the heart of God hitherto veiled and kept behind a curtain is laid

bare for all to see. And when does it happen? When Jesus cries out, “It is Finished.” This Lent our choir has introduced us to a new anthem part of which says,

“Here is love, vast as the ocean, loving kindness as the flood
when the Prince of Life our ransom shed for us his precious blood.
On the mount of crucifixion fountains opened deep and wide
Through the floodgates of God’s mercy flowed a vast and gracious tide
Grace and love, like mighty rivers, poured incessant from above,
And heaven’s peace and perfect justice kissed a guilty world in love.

*(“Here is Love, Vast as the Ocean” Words by William Rees,
Music by Robert Lowry arranged by C. L. Bass)*

For many generations when Jewish children had asked to see God they had been told he was behind that curtain of the temple in the holy of holies. From this moment on though when any children have asked to see God people have pointed them to the cross on Calvary’s hill where God’s love for the whole world has been most clearly revealed.

Yesterday in *Our Daily Bread* many of you may have read how one Jewish writer reminded his fellow-Hebrews of the impact of what had happened in the death of Jesus and how it had been symbolized in the curtain of the temple that was torn in two. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews reminds us that because of all that God has done to show us the heart of God and the glory of God in the death of Jesus on the cross we can know that not just the High Priest once a year but all of us at all times and in all places can “come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:16)
This is God’s gift to all who will receive it. Like that Roman Centurion, many may not have known all that was taking place or of which they were a part. Still today

there are many who like the people of whom Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth see the whole thing of the death of Jesus on a cross as foolishness. On this Holy Week, though, for those who have come to appreciate that in the life, the suffering and the death of Jesus on the cross we have seen the heart of God and in his words from that cross we have seen the glory of God so they have found God's gift of assurance and of confidence to be able to pray with Jesus in life and in death, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." We can pray in this way because as we move through Holy Week to the good news of Easter we can know assuredly that "It is Finished" was not a cry of defeat but of victory and that on the cross love's redeeming work was done for each one of us and for the whole world and that as our new Easter hymn this year will remind us we can know that nothing in life or in death can separate us from that love of God laid bare as Jesus died.

(Come and Join the Celebration: This new hymn was commissioned by Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church in Asheville, North Carolina in memory and honor of Ann Gettys Nash and was sung for the first time in their worship service on April 18, 2010. The words were written by Presbyterian Teaching Elder Carolyn Gillette Winfrey, and are used by permission. Copyright © 2010 Carolyn Winfrey Gillette. All rights reserved. The music based on the Welsh Tune Calon Lan was arranged by Stanley Littleton, our church organist).

May we all be able to use this Holy Week again to continue to grow in our appreciation of what it means that the curtain of the temple hiding God has been torn in two and we have seen the love God has for each one of us and for the whole world as Jesus died for us on the cross.

Prayer:

Leader:

Lord Jesus Christ, as you hung on the cross we wonder how you had the strength left to reflect on your life, your teaching, your preaching, your miracles, and now

on all that pain and suffering you had endured. We praise you that when others could see only defeat, you could cry out in victory, “It is finished,” as you rejoiced that “love’s redeeming work was done,” and that sin and evil and death would no longer be able to hold the final answer in human life. As you rejoiced in your mission accomplished we thank you for the example you have given us to be able with quiet confident trust to entrust our spirits in life and in death into the hands of our loving Father God.

Unison:

Holy Jesus, remind me that my Father God has put me here for a purpose as well. Help me to know how to live in such a way that when my earthly life is completed, I also will be able to say that I have finished the work I was sent here to do. Since I cannot know when that day may come, help me to express thanks and appreciation each day for all that you have given me. Remove grumbling and complaining from my life, and fill me instead with words of love and gratitude. Help me to care for people as you cared for them, to cooperate with the saving mission that the Father gave you, and to learn more of you and of your love for me, and for the whole world. Help me each day to pray, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit,” so that in life and in death I may know the assurance of the Father’s love and care that you fulfilled your mission to show to me, and to the whole world, for I ask these things in your name. Amen.

(Prayer based on prayers in The Seven Last Words of Christ by Rich Cleveland.2002,

www.emmausjourney.org)

Hymn page 32

“This is My Father’s World”
(Stanzas 1 and 2)

Terra Beata