

Good Friday 2023
Father, into your hands I commend my spirit...
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April 7, 2023, St. John's Sharon

From the Gospel of Luke:

Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.

A family surrounding the bedside
listens to the mechanical rhythms
of air moving through the machine.
Could be COVID or COPD or cancer
or any of myriad of other maladies
murdering a beloved mother
or father or sibling or child or spouse or friend.
Finally the last assisted breath is exhaled,
the plug is pulled,
and then silence....
a beat of silence followed by quiet weeping.

From Lamentations:

Look and see, is there any sorrow like my sorrow.

Suddenly and unexpectedly,
the last breath is inhaled,
painfully and desperately.
Then the last breath is expelled from the body,
not through the windpipe,
but through the bullet hole in the collapsing lung.
A person far too young falls to the ground
in a Ukrainian foxhole
or on a Baltimore sidewalk
or in their classroom.
The deafening silence cannot be heard
over the shrieks of terror
and din of chaos.

From Psalm 88:

*Do you work wonders for the dead?
Do the shades rise up to praise you?
Is your steadfast love declared in the grave?*

The sweet smell of ketosis
surrounds the hospice bed
as an elderly body consumes itself.
Rattling breaths

exit an open mouth
at increasingly protracted and irregular intervals.
No one even notices the final breath
until a silent peace descends,
disclosing that death has come at last.

From Philippians:

*Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God,
did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but...humbled himself
and became obedient unto death,
even death on a cross.*

Wracked, exhausted muscles fail
from holding up the body
hanging on a Roman cross.
The diaphragm is strained
and lungs are constrained
as the Lord of Glory
takes shallower and shallower breaths.

Slowly suffocating
and unable to project,
he almost inaudibly mouths the words,
Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit,
before a puff of breath
is exhaled
along with the life
of the Lord of Life.

In that final moment,
with women weeping and soldiers rolling dice,
something fundamentally changed
for all of us.

Christ Jesus,
the Son of God
who willingly gave up the form of God,
experienced what had been
the victory for darkness
up until that very moment.

Our High Priest deigned
to be with us

in all of our weakness,
including experiencing that culmination
of all the moments
that we
and every human being throughout history
decided to turn away from God,
to cut our own branches
and the branches of others
off from the life-giving vine.

The sinless one willingly submitted
to the sting of sin,
death.

When Jesus died on the cross,
death became infused
with the presence of God.

I'm not talking here about resurrection.
If we jump too far ahead in the story,
we miss the good news
that is particular to Good Friday.

That Good-Friday-good-news
is that at our deaths,
God is with us
because Jesus also died.

We still die to this body.
God has given us the freedom
to take care of one another
and we do not do so.

Even when we try,
we too often fail.

These frail, corruptible, moral bodies
cannot eternally endure the traumas
we inflict on ourselves and on one another,
and eventually they wear down and die,
if nothing worse happens along the way.

Yet, whatever brings us to that last breath,
a long peaceful life,
a horrific trauma,
or an overpowering disease,
at our last breath,
we exhale as Jesus did,
offering our spirits back to God.

And in that moment,
just like in every other moment,
God is with us.

Jesus has already been in this place

and we are not alone.

Jesus is not only there for our final transition.

Our creeds

and the witness of First Peter

tell us that Jesus also descended into hell that day.

In Sheol,

or Hades,

or the realm of the dead,

or whatever we call the place

that has no connection to the living,

Jesus was present

with all whose lives

become nothing more than shade.

God came

to the only place in the cosmos

where God had previously been absent.

From this moment forward,

nowhere,

not even under the earth,

could keep us separate us

from the radiant presence of God.

The Light of the World has passed

into the darkness of death,

and the darkness did not overcome it.

When Jesus handed his spirit

over to his Father

in his final breath,

his Father ensured that no darkness

could snuff out his light.

That no death could overcome his life.

That no enemy could finally defeat him.

In that horrible moment of death,

Jesus' work was not done,

and he went alone

into the far country of the enemy

so that we would never be there

without him,

so that even in death,

we can now find Jesus.

When our last moment comes,
 when we breathe out our last breath,
 when we hand over our spirit
 to our heavenly Father,
we who are united to Christ
 through our baptism into his death
 are there on the cross with him.

We are with him in his death
 because he is with us in ours.

We cannot now die truly alone.

We cannot now die alienated or forsaken by God.

Our deaths can no longer be
 without meaning or purpose.

We will be buried with Christ.

And nothing,
 not even death,
 can separate us from the love of God
 in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.