

Tenebrae Vespers  
19 April, Anno Domini 2019  
St. John 19:1-42  
Pr. Kurt Ulmer

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Everything is harder to understand in the dark. Step by step the candles have been extinguished and the light has faded. Everything falls into a haze and lines begin to grow fuzzy. What we were once so certain of, we now begin to question. We wonder if our minds are playing tricks on us.

When the Son of God breathed His last and the light of the sun failed, the great hope of the disciples and all those who had come to believe in this Jesus of Nazareth fell into darkness. “Were we wrong? Did we misunderstand? We thought we understood the miracles. We were certainly led to believe that this man now hanging humiliated and lifeless before us was the Christ of God who had come into the world to save the world. But now this. It’s over. He’s dead. The Jews won. Maybe they were right all along.”

But we must be careful not make our judgments in the dark. We must not let the sorrow of the moment cloud our understanding of what is actually happening. Those hours of Christ’s life certainly were filled to overflowing with deep darkness - lies and blasphemies and injustices. This is the power of darkness. The darkness of sin and death had so blinded man that he no longer recognized the One who in love and mercy had made man for the simple purpose of blessing him and living in holy communion with him.

In the haze of the taunting and scourging and mocking, all certainly does seem lost. The truth didn’t matter. Everyone knew Jesus was innocent. His doctrine and life were pure. But it didn’t matter. The scribes and Pharisees hated both and wanted Jesus dead. The same disciples who only hours earlier had insisted that they were prepared to die with Jesus, fled in order to save themselves. Pontius Pilate was only interested in self-preservation and keeping Caesar appeased. Jesus was alone with everyone turned against Him.

“Yes, yes, O Son of God. How pleased your Father must be with you that He lets you simply suffer all of this, that He doesn’t immediately send down those twelve legions of angels to keep you from suffering even a scratch, let alone being beaten and crucified. Is this really the Father’s will? Is God actually pleased to see the

Blood caked in your hair and dripping from your hands and feet? Does it bring God satisfaction to see you crying out in agony, struggling to even take even the shallowest breath? One thing does seem crystal clear, Jesus - God certainly has forsaken you. After all, no loving God would allow anyone, let alone His own Son, to suffer so horrifically, especially if you have perfectly kept His will and sought nothing but His glory. Would a loving God really allow this?"

The darkness of these hours 2000 ago made it impossible to see what actually happened, even as the darkness of your own sin and your own hours of affliction, do not give a true picture of the work of God. Jesus looked like nothing more than a washed up false prophet, a joke, a criminal receiving the just reward for His sins. What deep confusion fell over Jesus' disciples, particularly over Peter, James, and John who had not long before stood in Jesus' presence as His divine radiance was unveiled and God the Father said as clear as day "This is my beloved Son." That's easy to believe when Jesus is there speaking with the prophets. That's easy to believe when Jesus is raising people from the dead and driving out demons. But now? When He has been so brutalized that He doesn't even look like a person any more? When He hangs from the cross as the very picture of complete and utter weakness and defeat? This is God's beloved Son? This is God's work? His Son pierced with a spear like pig, naked and humiliated before the world, with spikes driven through His hands and feet? Is this what God does to His sinless beloved who didn't deserve this? And if so, what will He do to us wretched sinners who deserve every bit of it?" Or, perhaps, and even worse, Jesus is God's Son and God was just defeated.

When our reason finds itself in the deep darkness of affliction and death, when we are forced to stare into the dark abyss of our sin and taste the bitter gall of the Law's just condemnation, it is impossible for us to come to any conclusion other than death and the hatred of God.

But we must not allow ourselves to draw any conclusions about God when we are fumbling around in the darkness. We must silence our reason and our emotions. We must reject even what we are experiencing in the moment - good or bad. These are all darkness and will leave us only with despair if we do not take up the true light that enlightens the world. And let's be honest, the world is filled to overflowing with darkness - murder, human trafficking, cruel tyrants, greedy employers and employees, corrupt and self-seeking politicians, ignorant and selfish citizens, lying preachers, lazy Christians, uninhibited sexual perversions, endless rivers of gossip, weak and loveless men, mountains of aborted children, all kinds of mental illness leading to despair and hopelessness and even suicide. The list is

really endless. Each of you suffers now under your own darkness. No one is immune.

But darkness is not the light. Darkness is not the truth. Neither our abject guilt nor our afflictions are the truth. Yet, in His mercy, God uses even the darkness so that we may know the light. The light is Jesus. The light is that this very one we behold utterly forsaken, struck by fists and reeds and scourges and nails, forsaken by God is the Son of God perfectly carrying out the will of His Father by receiving in His flesh and soul God's unmuted wrath against, not His own, but our sin. The light is that Jesus is hanging there on the cross, despised and rejected by man, dead because He loves sinners and would rather suffer such torment than see it fall to you. Jesus allows Himself to be stripped so that you and I might be clothed in His perfect righteousness. Jesus allowed His side to be opened so that in Baptism you might be Baptized into His death and claim it as your own, so that you might drink deeply of His Blood and eat of His Flesh and be in the most real way possible, joined to Christ, united to Christ. He would give you Himself as true food and drink so that you may live, so that all that He won through His passion, through His unimaginable sorrow and suffering, could be yours.

The light that enlightens not only the darkness of Good Friday, but the darkness of this valley of the shadow of death, is that by dying, Jesus has swallowed up death and that now, His eternal life is freely bestowed upon you. The light is the Gospel that Jesus, who died, now lives and that all who believe in Him, who know God only in the promise of salvation through Jesus, will never suffer the just condemnation for their sins, will never taste the death of damnation. Instead, though you suffer the afflictions of this sinful world, you will live forever with Christ, where there is no darkness, only light, only truth, only the perfect joy of God's presence.

The journey to the light of eternal life, passes through the cross. Your sufferings and afflictions in this world, enlightened by the cross and empty tomb of Jesus, need not frighten or worry you. You must die if you would live. And while you make your way, Christ has given you the light of Gospel, His forgiving and life-giving Word which is proclaimed to you and distributed to you in Baptism and Holy Communion so that you are not lost in the darkness. You will stumble but the light remains. Walk in the light of Christ's atoning death and you too will rise from the dead and ascend into the eternal day of heaven.

In the Name of +Jesus.