



Anglican Church *of the*
Good Shepherd

Good Friday Devotional

April 2, 2021



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*Serving Individuals and Families of the Concho Valley
with the Transforming Love of Jesus Christ!*

Darkness Covered the Land

By Rev. Vance Rains

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last. The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, "Surely this was a righteous man." When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away. But all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

(Luke 23:44-49)

Jesus died in the dark. In the middle of day, when the sun was supposed to shine, from noon to three, a deep darkness shrouded the whole land. The sun wouldn't shine.

Just as, "***In the beginning,***" when the earth was a dark, formless, chaotic mass, before God said, "***Let there be light,***" as Jesus hung on the cross, the earth was plunged, once again, into chaotic darkness. Which is strange, because Jesus came to be a light in the darkness. At Christmas, we read...

"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned." (Isaiah 9:2)

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome" (John 1:5)

Yet, that Friday, it seemed darkness had overcome the light, overwhelmed the light, snuffed out the light. The light of the world – the innocent, sinless, Lamb of God, who came to take away the sins of the world – was crucified by evil men.

They'd conspired. They'd told lies. They'd taken advantage of the weakness and greed of one of Jesus' own trusted inner circle. And, now, the miracle worker and so called, "King of the Jews," was defeated. Darkness won, or so it appeared.

~ Pause and Pray ~

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, for the sun stopped shining.

We often, rightly, associate darkness with evil. Evil deeds are done under the cover of darkness. But the darkness on Good Friday was NOT the darkness of evil. Though dark deeds were done, this darkness was something else.

What was this darkness? This was the darkness of the Father's grief, watching his beloved son suffer and die. This was the darkness piercing the heart of God, as the Holy Trinity experienced the separation and death of the Son. This was creation reacting to the evil done to its creator. The sun, itself, refused to shine on this dark day.

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, for the sun stopped shining.

~ Pause and Pray ~

Lent, and especially Holy Week, is a darker season of the Christian year. During Lent, reflect on Jesus' journey to the cross, and his sacrificial death for our sins. Lent is for repentance, confession, self-denial, and self-examination. Compared to Christmas and Easter, Lent is meant to be darker.

But, this particular Lent, here in Coral Springs and Parkland, has been much, much darker than usual. Some have referred to the February 14 tragedy at Stoneman Douglas High School as the "Valentine's Day" tragedy. It was also Ash Wednesday – the first day of Lent. Some will always associate the Stoneman Douglas tragedy with future Valentine's Days. Not me. I'll always remember it on Ash Wednesdays. For me, Ash Wednesdays will never be the same.

That Ash Wednesday night, as we gathered in the immediate aftermath, we marked our foreheads with ashes, in the form of a cross, as a reminder of our sin, mortality, and absolute dependence on God. ***"From ashes you have come. To ashes you will return."***

But, that night, as the dead were still lying where they'd fallen, as the injured were being treated, and many parents were still separated from their children, and as the names of some of the dead had not yet been announced, the cross-shaped ashes we wore also represented our terrible grief and lament.

For the families and friends of the seventeen who died, for the families and friends of the seventeen who were injured, and for our whole community, these forty days of Lent have been undeniably dark. Darkness has covered the land, here, too.

~ Pause and Pray ~

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, for the sun stopped shining... Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last.

As Jesus hung on the cross, in the darkness, he was bearing on his shoulders the darkness of sin, and the brokenness and evil of the entire history of this world. In some way, defying comprehension, Jesus' death, even includes the darkness of our own recent and the dark and difficult days that have followed, here, for us.

If Scripture teaches us anything, it's that God is with us when darkness crashes over us.

Martin Luther King preached, ***"We must also remember that God does not forget his children who are victims of evil forces... When the lamp of hope flickers and candle of faith runs low, he restoreth our souls, giving us renewed vigor to carry on. He is with us not only in the noontime of fulfillment but also in the midnight of despair."***

And, in his final moments Jesus said, ***"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."*** ***When he had said this, he breathed his last.***

At last, at about 3:00 in the afternoon, his ordeal was over. The Son of God was dead. For the moment, darkness defeated the light.

There is a phrase used at many funeral and memorial services, that says something like, "Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your servant..." adopted from the final words on Jesus' lips. I didn't attend the funerals of the seventeen who died, but I'm certain some version of that phrase was said – pastors, priests, and rabbis committing the souls of the innocent to our heavenly Father, just as Jesus offered his.

~ Pause and Pray ~

"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

Undeniably, Jesus' ordeal was horrific. Starting with an arrest; then a long, sleepless night– full of hate, ugliness, condemnation and abuse; dragged to Caiaphas, to Pilate, to Herod, and then back to Pilate; the abuse and mockery of cruel Roman soldiers; rejection from the crowds shouting, "crucify him!"; a severe beating, nearly killing him; a crown of thorns shoved down on his head; a long walk to Golgotha, carrying his own cross on shoulders already flayed by the soldier's whip. All before he was nailed to the cross.

When he came to Golgotha, long nails were driven through his hands and feet, affixing him to the cross. And, then his cross was raised, leaving Jesus dangling from just three nails, driven through his flesh. For six, long, excruciating hours, he suffered unspeakable agony, as life slowly drained from his body. Few deaths are as gruesome or humiliating as crucifixion.

And, while he hung on his cross, his disciples abandoned him and the leaders of his own religion mocked him.

As darkness covered the land, he may have wondered if God abandoned him too.

But, as Jesus' final moments came, Jesus appeared to be at peace.

Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." (Luke 23:26)

As Jesus died, he was in control. The casualty of terrible human cruelty, yet Jesus was no victim. Dying in the darkness, yet nothing could extinguish his light. Dying because he chose to give his life for us, sacrificially. Satisfied, that he accomplished what he came to do.

John Stott writes, ***"No-one took his life from him, he insisted; he was going to lay it down of his own accord."***

"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

And, Jesus said these words in a "loud voice" – not an embarrassed whisper, or pathetic whimper, or mumbled in weakness. He wasn't a scared child, calling out in the dark. In his strongest voice, Jesus proclaimed, ***"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit"***; spoken in strength and confidence in the one who would receive his Spirit. Even as his physical strength faded, his faith in God was unwavering. As he was betrayed, abused, abandoned and killed by everyone else, HE KNEW he could entrust his spirit, in that vulnerable moment, into the faithful hands of his Heavenly Father. He surrendered his spirit to God, and he breathed his last.

Most images of Jesus on the cross, depict him with head lowered, and eyes closed. In other words, most crucifixes portray a dead Jesus. But, for the majority of the time Jesus hung on the cross, he was alive. I'm sure he was in agony. I'm sure he was too weak to hold up his head. I'm sure his eye-lids drooped after that long sleepless night, and as weakness overcame him, as he hung in the darkness.

But, Jesus faced his destiny with eyes wide open.

Jesus faced his accusers with eyes wide open.

Jesus faced his cross with eyes wide open.

In the darkness of Good Friday, his eyes were focused and clear.

And, in his final moments, Jesus embraced his death, with eyes wide open.

Moments, later, he would open his eyes again, and behold the face of his Father.

~ Pause and Pray ~

Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last.

I wonder when the sun shined again. Did the sun return that day, after Jesus was taken down from his cross, or did the darkness remain, as afternoon passed into the night? Was it dark, when they laid Jesus in his tomb? Did the sun rise with the dawn on Saturday morning, or did dark clouds linger that day too? Whether the sun literally shined, or not, until the empty tomb was discovered on Easter morning, while Jesus lay dead in his grave, the world was dark a place.

But, Easter morning, the darkness lifted.

Dr. Martin Luther King also said, ***"When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds and our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a Great Power in the universe whose name is God, and he is able to make a way out of no way, and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows."***

For a dark moment in history, darkness appeared to win. And, undeniably, for some, the darkness of this year's Ash Wednesday will never pass, not in this life. The darkness of grief will always be with them, in this life. And, that is tragic. This life, this world, as we know, can be filled with terrible darkness.

But, light has overcome the dark. Death was confronted in the darkness, and was defeated. We may endure too many dark Good Fridays, in this life. But, the dawn of Easter is coming.

With thirty years of varied ministry experiences, Vance Rains is currently the Lead Pastor of First United Methodist Church of Orlando, and has previously served as the Senior Pastor of First Church Coral Springs and Ortega UMC, Jacksonville, Campus Pastor of the Wesley Foundation at Florida State University, Executive Director of Higher Education and Campus Ministry for the Florida Annual Conference, Founding Pastor of a new United Methodist congregation called The Grapevine in Port St. Lucie, and as the Minister of Program and Administration at First UMC of Winter Park.

<https://vancerains.com/2018/03/30/darkness-covered-the-land-a-good-friday-sermon/>