

Good Friday
Various Passion Readings
Septem verba et Tenebrae
2 April 2021
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

+ Iesu iuva +

Beloved in the Lord: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

What is to be done with the tree that does not bud and flower? What should be done with the tares that grow among the wheat? Who cares where the chaff blows when the wind takes it? What sort of pruning does that branch get that bears no fruit? What is to be done with faithless Israel, who will not heed the words of the prophets? What should be the fate of the Pharisee proud in the valor of his own good breeding, his own good deeds? What becomes of the dog that constantly returns to its own vomit? What fury of condemnation should await Jacob for his perfidy, David for his adultery and murder, Caiaphas for his theocide, Peter for his denial, Saul for serving as ringmaster at the stoning of Stephen? How much hacking must the sharp word of the law do before it shapes its object to perfection? What would be left?

In fact, soon isn't soon enough for the axe to be laid at the root of the tree that refuses to bud—and its stump dug out. If it won't grow when it should, let it not grow at all. The tares—the weeds—are tares torn out of the ground, root and all. No one will be found to chase the wind for the chaff. Every dead, fruitless branch must be mercilessly pruned to live wood and tossed in the fire.

And tell me: which destruction and exile of faithless Israel was undeserved—the Assyrian one, idolaters consigned to oblivion? The Babylonian one, leaving Judah to return to the ruins of its temple? The Roman one, that drove Israel forever from the land God promised? Doesn't the proud Pharisee who will stand in judgment before One whose righteousness far exceeds his own already have one foot firmly planted in hell? Won't that dog be its own doing in whose steady diet is its own vomit? And Jacob and David and Caiaphas and Peter and Saul—for their perfidy, adultery, murder, theocide, denial—for their harm to neighbor, for their blasphemy—do they deserve anything but death—and worse?

The Law seeks perfection. But it will whittle the sinner down to nothing, hack him to death, long before it can find it.

What if it were to start cutting on you? What would be left of you?

For you prove time and again to be the tree that cannot come to bud. If your life were an acre, how many square feet do the tares *not* grow in? Which of your deeds, light in goodness, will not be borne on the wind—worthless to your neighbor, worthless to you, iniquitous to God? Tell me. Name it. In what season have you borne to maturity and in abundance the fruit expected of a branch grafted into Christ, the true Vine? Do you actually think that had lived back then you alone would have been left unscathed by the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Romans? No. And yet the comfort quilt that shields you from God's wrath is stuffed with the batting of the Pharisee: "God, I thank You I am not like other men." You've ingested enough of your own vomit to rot your teeth. And there's no portion of your heart, no recess of your mind and will, no corner of your soul, no member of your body, that is unsullied by treachery planned, adultery and infidelity longed for, hatred nursed, crime abetted, the unholy sniffed, gazed upon, tasted, handled, heard.

Sinner: when God's Law has done with you, what will be left? If the Law is to perfect you it will not stop. Ever. Not as long as you live; not even when you're dead. You will be left a lifeless stump, an uprooted tare, a dead branch crackling in the fire. And it will not leave you until there's no you.

It's almost like the Law must kill you.

As, in fact, it must.

Not that the Law is evil. Quite to the contrary. The Law of God is the mother of all good, the beginning of all wisdom.

For when God had done with creation, His holy Law stitched and sewn into every last corner of it, He said, "It is very good." By His Law and under no compulsion the stars moved through the sky like clockwork. By His Law and under no force the seasons came and went for planting and harvesttime. By His Law and entirely spontaneously every living thing ... lived, and lived only to create more life, for the Law loves life. And by His Law—without compulsion, without force, and entirely spontaneously—Adam loved Eve as he loved himself, and she him; and both feared, loved and trusted in God above all things. They His creatures, He their Creator. It was very good. And not just where they lived, but *how* they lived—it was called Paradise.

But laws are laws. No good—in fact, only destruction—can come from defying them. Not that the laws are at fault. A speeder isn't killed by the speed limit. He's killed by himself. A sinner isn't condemned by God's Law. He's condemned by himself. By definition a law cannot be broken, it can only break what would break it. Throw a glass into the air in defiance of gravity and what will you get—a broken glass.

And yet, after the fall into sin you could do *nothing* but defy God's Law. Who gets hurt in that scenario? God? No. His Law? No. You? Yes. You become the tree hacked down, the dead branch thrown into the fire, tare torn out and wilting in the sun, the chaff blown away.

But now listen to me.

God *never* wanted it that way.

And yet the Law must be fulfilled. It cannot bend. It can't break. It cannot be defied. Something must give.

The tree must be hacked down. The dead branch must be thrown into the fire. The tare must be torn out and killed. The chaff must be blown away. The dog must rot from the inside out. The sinner must die; and the condemned must suffer hell.

Fellow-redeemed: behold the Lord Jesus Christ, the One affixed to the Cross. He has become the tree, the dead branch, the tare, the chaff, the dog rotting from inside out. He has become the Sinner, sentenced to death; the Condemned, cursed and damned to hell. Such is the mercy of God toward you. It is you have defied God's Law. What Law has He broken?

And yet. And yet...

Imagine the shame of someone arrested in broad daylight, handcuffed, stuffed into the back of a cop car in front of friends and family. And yet, it is not you, but He, who is paraded in shame before His own people.

Imagine your anxiety sitting before the judge as he finds guilt and passes sentence. And yet it is not you, but He, who is fingered as the guilty one, on whom sentence is passed.

Imagine how heavy your feet on your last walk down death row. And yet, it is not you, but He, who trips down Gabbatha.

Imagine how your heart would fall to see the cold, clinical death chamber. And yet, it is not you, but He, who gazes upon blood-strewn Golgotha.

Imagine the claustrophobic horror of being strapped to the bed and the sting of the needles—one in this arm and one in the other. And yet it is not you, but He, whose wrists and calves are bound to the wood, whose hands and feet are pierced with spikes.

Imagine the shame on your mother's face as she gazes through the window of the death chamber. And yet it is not your mother, but His, who is mortified to see Him.

Imagine the utter solitude, the utter forsakenness, as your friends and family were obvious by their absence, doing everything they could to put you out of mind. And yet, it is not you, but this Stricken Shepherd whose sheep have scattered.

Worst of all, imagine that there is no God to help. No God to offer solace. No God to bear that guilt in your place. For, beloved, He is the only God to help. The only God to offer solace. There's no shifting of guilt, for God's verdict is final and He bears it all. There's no scapegoat. For He is Himself the Scapegoat. There's no mercy to be found. For His merciless suffering is the fount of all mercy. There's no solace for this Sinner. For He dies comfortless that we may be comforted. There is no righteousness of God to rescue Him. For His death is God's righteousness. And there is no God to come to His aid. For He is the God who has come to the aid of all.

Even of you.

For in His sacred Body He has borne all your sins. By His Blood He has blotted out all your transgressions. He has entered and borne the wreckage of your life, and taken it from you. For He has become stump, tare, chaff and branch. For you. He is Israel, He is Adam and all his descendants, reduced to One. He bears the sin of those who came before and of those who follow. He is made the whittling block of the relentless Law until there is nothing left to whittle away. No breath. No pulse of life. No firing of a single synapsis in the brain.

For what was yours was made to be His; and—O blessed death!—all that is His—His victory-by-death over sin, His victory-by-resurrection over death, His eternal-life-by-resurrection instead of hell—all that is yours.

Amen.

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