

“Listen Closely!”
by Rom A. Pegram (3/25/16, Good Friday)

As we look today to Jesus’ last words from the cross, we need to remember just how important last words can be. If you’re a United Methodist minister, for instance, you probably know the last words of John Wesley: “The best of all is, God is with us!” The best of all, indeed, is that God is with us. In just a few short words, and because they were his last—so important, John Wesley gave us words of hope, and words to live by, as he did. The reality of God’s presence was what he held onto in his final moments. Jesus had come to live with us ... and in us. That truth was John Wesley’s ‘the best of all’. So, what is your ‘best of all’ today?

Jesus ‘best of all’ is given to us from all four Gospels. Tonight, I’m going to read to you the account of the cross from the Gospel of Luke, but then I’ll be pulling in ‘last words’ from the other three Gospels as we go along tonight. Would you follow along with me? This is from Luke 23:26-43 (NLT):

As they led Jesus away, a man named Simon, who was from Cyrene, happened to be coming in from the countryside. The soldiers seized him and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. ²⁷ A large crowd trailed behind, including many grief-stricken women. ²⁸ But Jesus turned and said to them, “Daughters of Jerusalem, don’t weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹ For the days are coming when they will say, ‘Fortunate indeed are the women who are childless, the wombs that have not borne a child and the breasts that have never nursed.’ ³⁰ People will beg the mountains, ‘Fall on us,’ and plead with the hills, ‘Bury us.’ ³¹ For if these things are done when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?” ³² Two others, both criminals, were led out to be executed with him. ³³ When they came to a place called The Skull, they nailed him to the cross. And the criminals were also crucified—one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴ Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.” And the soldiers gambled for his clothes by throwing dice. ³⁵ The crowd watched and the leaders scoffed. “He saved others,” they said, “let him save himself if he is really God’s Messiah, the Chosen One.” ³⁶ The soldiers mocked him, too, by offering him a drink of sour wine. ³⁷ They called out to him, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” ³⁸ A sign was fastened to the cross above him with these words: “This is the King of the Jews.” ³⁹ One of the criminals hanging beside him scoffed, “So you’re the Messiah, are you? Prove it by saving yourself—and us, too, while you’re at it!” ⁴⁰ But the other criminal protested, “Don’t you fear God even when you have been sentenced to die? ⁴¹ We deserve to die for our crimes, but this man hasn’t done anything wrong.” ⁴² Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.” ⁴³ And Jesus replied, “I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Let’s jump right into Jesus ‘best of all’, shall we? And let’s start with this last word...

Father, Forgive Them. Usually, it seems, we ask for forgiveness for ourselves, don’t we? When we go to bed at night, we ask God to forgive us; we pray in church ‘Father, forgive *us* our sins’; each time we receive Holy Communion, we ask for and receive

cleansing, healing, and forgiveness; BUT ... in Luke's Gospel, when Jesus is being crucified, he doesn't ask for forgiveness for himself, but he offers *forgiveness* to others...

Now, visualizing Jesus' context in our day can be very difficult for us—crucifixions not really a part of our reality in 2015. They were unimaginably and intentionally brutal! Jesus was beaten so badly earlier in the day that he could hardly walk. The cross weighed upwards of 100 lbs., so Jesus—at one point—stumbled under its weight and a man by the name of Simon of Cyrene was asked to help him. The Roman soldiers, in Jesus' day, wanted to make crucifixions as ugly and obscenely grotesque as possible. For instance, the soldiers weren't content just to drive nails. They laughed; they spit; they yelled; they taunted. They stripped Jesus of all dignity—his clothes, etc.

It would've been gracious for Jesus simply to have kept quiet. With the wounds that'd been afflicted, I'm sure it was painful for him to even talk. But in the midst of the soldiers' disrespectful words & actions, and to the leaders responsible for Jesus being sent to the cross, he spoke softly to his Heavenly Father saying: "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing" (Luke 23:34).

Powerful meaning screams at you from this context, doesn't it? Folks, if Jesus could forgive such savage cruelty, surely he can and will forgive you and me. Just think, no matter what you've said or done, you can go to Jesus with a penitent heart, and he will forgive you just as he forgave those who crucified him! Isn't that GOOD NEWS? "The best of all...."

But wait, there's a second message in Jesus' words! We not only can receive forgiveness, but we're called upon to forgive others, too! Don't forget the Lord's Prayer: "Father, forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." If we're Jesus' disciples, you and I must forgive too! Here's his second word:

Today, in Paradise. Wow! In Luke's account of Jesus' crucifixion, one thief rejected Jesus' love ... and the other grabbed hold of it for all it was worth! Both men were guilty as robbers, maybe murderers, maybe rebels against Rome; both were receiving punishment on this day. But their responses to the current situation ... and to the man who hung between them ... was quite different, wasn't it? One criminal was bitter... He died with a curse on his lips! The other felt forgiveness and responded to the love in Jesus' heart; he pleaded with Jesus in the midst of his pain, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." To which Jesus quickly replied, "I assure you that *today* you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:42-43).

Folks, there are some people who think we lie in the grave until 'Resurrection Day' when Jesus comes again. But I don't believe that to be scriptural. I believe in 'TODAY'—I believe we can be with Jesus the moment we die—TODAY! And besides the scriptures, here's why, and this is but an example of many witnesses I've heard from others:

My Uncle Wayne Ridgell was present in the hospital room when my maternal grandfather died. He'd had cancer and was now in the hospital, basically to be kept comfortable. In the final moments before he died, he was singing hymns and gospel songs that he'd memorized over the years—*worshiping right there in the hospital room*. (They actually had to close his door, because his singing was so loud...)

Then, just before he took his final breath, he sat straight up in bed ... looked at the wall in front of him, as if he was looking out a window, and said, "Jesus...." He saw Jesus! And I believe Granddaddy was with Jesus on that day!

Again, that is one of many stories I've heard from folks over the years who've been with loved ones at the time of death ... or have heard of others who've had similar experiences. TODAY is what Jesus said... "The best of all...." Next:

Here is Your Son....Here is Your Mother. John's Gospel tells us there were 3 women who stood with John at the foot of the cross—the 3 *Marys*. There was Mary of Magdala—the one whom Jesus had healed of demon possession. The second woman was Mary, the wife of Clopas—Mary the mother of Jesus' sister-in law by marriage; Clopas would have been Joseph's brother—possibly a caretaker of the family after Joseph's death. And, finally—of course, Jesus' mother Mary was there ... watching the horrible death of her oldest son...

Then, near death, Jesus looked at his mother and John and said bluntly: "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to his disciple, "Here is your mother" (John 19:26-27). They became a family that day; it's wonderful when, after the death of a loved one, the family becomes even closer ... and sometimes larger; this is what happened that day in Mary's and John's lives. And don't miss what it says next; these next words are riveting: "And from that time on, this disciple took her into his home" (v.27); Mary was cared for as long as she lived; Jesus—as the eldest son—made sure of that... "The best of all...." Then:

Why Have You Left Me? They were laughing at Jesus; the chief priests and top scribes mockingly called out, "He saved others ... but he can't save himself!" (Mark 15:31). And with blood oozing out of his hands & feet, scarcely able to breathe, minutes away from dying, Jesus whispers these words: "'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" (Mark 15:34).

Now, I'm sure Jesus was feeling very human at this point—experiencing first-hand all of the agony that goes along with being a sacrifice. But, there's something else that grabbed me that I don't want you to miss—the word 'why'. That word comes out of our mouths whenever the innocent suffer, doesn't it?

- The Christians being persecuted and beheaded by anti-Christian groups like ISIS...
- Young people and police officers dying all over our country because of violent and unjust behavior...

- Or a loved one who just died way too soon...

WHY? *Isn't that what we want to ask?* Apparently, to the 'why?' question, we're left without an answer except 'someday we'll understand.' But, after further study, we can see that even if Jesus did feel abandoned here, *he wasn't just whining!* He might have felt all alone at this point, but that's not the whole story! *Jesus is actually quoting Psalm 22.* Do you remember from a few weeks ago? Jesus probably learned these on his mother's knee, learning to pray the psalms. Perhaps that's what he was doing on this day. Here's a sampling from Psalm 22:

My God! My God,
 why have you left me all alone? (v. 1).
 All who see me make fun of me (v. 7).
 I can count all my bones! (v. 17).
 They divvy up my garments among themselves;
 they cast lots for my clothes (v. 18).

But the psalm continues as a poem of actual experience and fantastic faith! Listen:

But you, Lord! Don't be far away!
 You are my strength! (v. 19).
 I offer praise in the great congregation because of you;
 I will fulfill my promises (v. 25).
 They will proclaim God's righteousness to those not yet born,
 telling them what God has done (v. 31).

So, Jesus' near-final word from the cross is actually a meditation of a powerful psalm that does express loneliness & sorrow, but also expresses faith & final victory! "The best of all...." Next...

I Am Thirsty. Three times, according to the Gospels, Jesus is offered a drink. Mark's Gospel says the first time was right before the crucifixion: "They tried to give him wine mixed with myrrh" (Mark 15:23), and Jesus refused it—desiring to fully identify with people in their pain & suffering. The second offer of wine took place after Jesus was nailed to the cross; in the midst of the soldier's mocking, they offered Jesus a drink, almost as a toast (Luke 23:36-38). And the third time is recorded in the Gospel of John (19:28), where Jesus is near death and says, "I am thirsty", the soldier's respond, offering him a drink—which he receives, then dies...

Have you ever been with someone when they're near death? If they're in the hospital, many times you can offer them ice chips, or a drink of water, because as their body begins to shut down, their lips become parched, their mouths dry out, and their tongues become stiff...

This is what Jesus was going through—a very human experience, so he understands our every need, especially at the time of death. "The best of all...." Just a couple more:

It Is Finished. Do you remember a time when you breathed a sigh of relief after finishing a very important task? Maybe it was a recent term paper, if you're a student. Maybe it's a remodeling project at home and it's finally finished. Or maybe it's when you finally get your kids through college and it feels so good—a huge accomplishment for the student and parents alike. In a similar way for Jesus, his words from the cross of “It is finished!” were not words of defeat; they were, instead, words of victory! These words describe for us *why we celebrate Easter! The cross was a demonstration of divine love for all! Jesus' conquered death ... not only for himself, but for us; and we can have victory today by putting our faith in the One who uttered these words: “It is finished!” ‘The best of all’ is ... we have victory over death! Then, Jesus says...*

Into Your Hands. Luke 23:46 (NLT) records Jesus saying, “Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands!” I've known these words for what seems like a lifetime, but for the longest time I had no idea where these words came from; again, Jesus was quoting scripture (Psalm 31:5); listen...

O LORD, I have come to you for protection; don't let me be disgraced. Save me, for you do what is right. ² Turn your ear to listen to me; rescue me quickly. Be my rock of protection, a fortress where I will be safe. ³ You are my rock and my fortress. For the honor of your name, lead me out of this danger. ⁴ Pull me from the trap my enemies set for me, for I find protection in you alone. ⁵ I entrust my spirit into your hand. Rescue me, LORD, for you are a faithful God.

And with those words he breathed his last... ‘The best of all’ is ... we can trust God with our lives, too! Folks, the GOOD NEWS on this Good Friday is that death was not God's final word. God's word in Jesus Christ is life! And as we end this Lenten series together, I think it most appropriate that we end with Jesus final words from the cross...

- The Savior who was a man of prayer...
- Who set his face to Jerusalem—decided to do God's will no matter what...
- Who taught and wishes us to teach his ways...
- Who healed and wishes us to heal and to care as he did...
- Who fed the hungry, remembered the poor, the starving and the naked...
- Who became a prisoner and wants us to take his Gospel to others who are marginalized in our society...

Folks, let's remember Jesus' ‘best of all’ that he spoke from the cross. And with confidence, let's place our lives into God's hands tonight, shall we? With confidence, as Jesus did, let's ‘set our face’ to always do God's will in our lives—that we too might be an example of his divine love to all whom God allows to cross our paths...