



ST BART'S

A MEDITATION by:

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“It Is Finished”

A meditation preached on March 29, 2013

Good Friday: The Three Hour Service from 12 noon to 3 o'clock

Based on John 19:29-30, 33-37

For six weeks, we have been preparing for the death of Jesus: we have watched him in hungry prayer. For five days, we have witnessed his final trials, seen him in confused public reverie, bargaining with God and accepting his fate. We have been with him as he has been betrayed, imprisoned, tried, mocked, and beaten.

For two hours, we have wept together to hear him speak his last words. And now he is tired and broken. The fight has gone out of him. And we're as ready as we'll ever be.

Four winters ago, a friend asked me to visit him in Iowa. He'd been sick for a while and wasn't up for travel, so I went quickly. After a long day with connecting flights and snow delays in Boston, Detroit and Chicago, I arrived, exhausted, and I felt awful. But he looked worse—his eyes were glassy, and there was a smear on his cheek that looked like blood.

He picked me up from the airport in his dream car, this American-made, used sedan that I didn't even know he owned and the first thing on my agenda was sleep; but he had another plan.

He had spent all thirty years of his life in these two towns that straddled the Illinois-Iowa border and wanted to show me where he grew up. So that night we drove through all of it as he recounted the biographical facts tied to each place. But it wasn't a normal story, designed to entertain or charm me. Instead he gave me a dry list of facts: where his gym teacher had lived, where his uncle had gone to middle school, a park he had never played in.

By dawn I was bored and frustrated. I thought about yelling at him for asking me to visit when he was too sick to actually spend time together, for taking me on a pitch-black tour of nothing. And, to be honest, I was probably crafting that nasty speech when he told me that he was dying.

For some reason, I hadn't noticed. I thought he was ok.

But, “No,” he told me, “it is finished.”

Those words overwhelmed me with two competing feelings: relief and dreadful anxiety. I was relieved because he had been suffering for so long. A year earlier, the doctors had foretold his death and we had watched his body break down, watched him in anguish as it did. His loved ones had been laboring over him, cooking, delivering, washing, and praying. For our own sakes, we were prepared for the suffering to end, eager to let go of pain and move on to our regular lives again.

But I was also incredibly anxious. There was something about his being able to articulate his fate that made it seem like it could be changed, like it wasn't too late, like it wasn't really finished.

That's the feeling I always have when we get to this reading from John. Often, relating to Jesus can feel like such a challenge. He's always speaking in riddles or doing miracles, somehow both human and divine, sometimes alive, sometimes resurrected. It can be alienating. It is hard to imagine someone walking on water or turning water into wine. But here, in John, Jesus is something that I can fathom. He is about to die.

The next night, my friend wanted to go for the same drive. This time I was prepared for the sad but dull night, ready to endure this little bit of discomfort because it was what he needed—to feel like someone would remember his life when he was gone. We only made it a few blocks before he pulled over and needed me to take the wheel, to retrace our steps from

the night before. But I had barely listened to him; I hadn't memorized the route. So together we snaked up and down every street—mixing things he cared about with blocks he'd never seen before. He didn't tell his story again.

We try so hard, but no matter what we do, we cannot mourn someone before they are gone. We try to make amends, to rekindle memories, force ourselves to look at the things that we expect to miss, in order to take some of the edge off later. We try to soak up the minutes, so we can inoculate ourselves against our own memories.

Six months after my friend died, I got a call from the car dealership where, it turns out, he had purchased his dream car just hours before I had arrived. He had used my name as a reference, and had now defaulted on the payments.

The surprise of hearing his name unexpectedly punctured me. I had guarded myself against every type of pain that I could possibly predict. In all of my mourning, how could I have failed to anticipate this phone call from a stranger? I realized then and there that none of those guarded-against events would come to pass. Instead I would be delivered with completely unexpected varieties of grief. This whole time I had been waiting for pain to end-- the pain of watching him suffer, the pain of uncertainty around his death, the pain of losing him. But instead of going away, the pain seemed to have been transformed into a new version of itself—one I had less experience handling, one that seemed dangerously hard to predict or control.

I told the car dealership that my friend had moved and that I didn't have his new number. So they still continue to call me every month, just to see if I've heard from him. And I continue to let them because I can bear that pain—but I can't bear the pain of explaining his death to someone who will not be hurt by it.

Even though we have been preparing ourselves for the death of Jesus, even though we prepare ourselves every year, we can never be ready. We reflect and meditate and feel like we're making progress, against the inevitable heartbreak. Once it's over, we will return to our whole selves, fully rehabilitated, and healthy, we expect. Maybe we think it will take a little time—we will grieve and then we will get over it. We try to wait for the pain to end before we resume our normal lives.

But that doesn't work.

Death breaks in, like it does in everyday life, and all of our preparations cannot staunch the grief. If we wait until we are completely healed to act, we might just wait forever.

But after Jesus is dead, after it is finished, the soldiers come. And they do not break his legs, but they pierce his side with a spear. And though he is divine, Jesus never heals that puncture. It mars his body and despite this acute cut, he is not destroyed.

The imperfection, this unremitting pain, is part of his humanity and is part of his Godliness. Though it is unsightly and though it weeps and burns and slows him down, though it might seem like a complete surprise after all the afflictions that we have prepared for, we know that even with that wound, he will be whole enough to walk in love.

Amen.

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