



# ST BART'S

A MEDITATION by:

The Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Rector

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## "Into your hands I commend my spirit"

*A meditation preached on, March 29, 2013*

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

*Based on Luke 23: 44-49*

In small safe groups preachers often admit to one another that each of us really has only one sermon—one that we diligently rework, tweaking here and there over and over. In these conversations, we argue emphatically that it is not that we are non-creative or lazy but simply deeply committed to our core truth. A candidate for my one sermon is certainly this: it was not the death of Jesus that was singularly salvific but God's gift of Jesus in the fullness of his life and death that was and is the act of salvation for us as Christians. God sent and sends in love, always in love, never to exact payment but lovingly and freely. As I have listened to these ancient words from the cross again this afternoon, I am as sure of this as I can be of anything in the world.

The seventh word today contains the account of Jesus' breathing his last, and for me, given what I hold to be true, this moment in his life, the precise moment of his death, not surprisingly teaches us an invaluable lesson about living. Like most of you I have heard this passage at least once a year for most of my life; but this year I was particularly struck with the manner in which Jesus spoke these words. The narrator writes, "Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.' Having said this, he breathed his last." Recognizing to the extent that I can the agony of this horrific death, which admittedly lies beyond my capacity to imagine, I have always presumed this cry to be a desperate plea for help, a final petition from Jesus to his Father that his spirit depart the suffering of the moment. The Greek *phone megale* doesn't necessarily carry that connotation but simply that Jesus spoke with a *loud* voice. I hear these words as firmly spoken words, delivered not in the tone of a tired, though of course he was, desperate man but as the words of one who with confidence knew that death was a passage not an end. These were words of completion and assurance that one part of life was now ended.

Even in the midst of an agonizing death, we are given a glimpse of something that is true for all of us: the membrane between life and death is paper thin and soaked with God. Because we so terribly miss our loved ones who have left us, who have died, we have come to understand this passage—death—to be a great gulf between this life and the next. And while it is unknown—no one has crossed it and returned to us—I believe that Jesus' commending himself to the Father is acknowledgement that it this passage is utterly crossable and as natural and normal as life is. That which is truest about us, our very essence, does not cease to be but is transformed seamlessly to a life with God that is currently beyond our imagination, the limitations of which have nothing to do with the reality.

At this darkest of hours in the Christian story, and it does not get darker than this, this moment when Jesus breathed his last, we are by these marvelous words given a glimpse of Easter. This is a slightly different conceit of the ending of this day, a twist of conventional understanding that we should leave this place on Good Friday in deep sadness and, of course, that emotion is all around us; but the surprise of God is always that there is another story, another movement in the plot of our existence as God's children, movement toward the fullness of life that always defeats death. The fact that we get that even from the cross at the end of Jesus' life is hugely significant to me.

It is from these words that the sting of death begins to lose its power over us, showing us that life and death are not ultimately disconnected, that each resides in the tender providence of God and that neither needs be feared. When on Ash Wednesday we reminded ourselves that it is from dust that we have come and that to dust we shall return, we omitted the more important truth, the one that is even more foundational than the ground upon which we stand: it is from God that we have come and it is God to whom we shall return. Our spirits live in the increasingly thin space between this life, which we know, or think we know, and the next, which lies more closely to us than we have imagined.

Eternity has begun; it is here and is the air in which we live and breathe and have being. Death and life are our constructs, and each is filled with God. "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." These are words by which we can live now and throughout eternity. In the name of God: *Amen*.

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