



ST BART'S

A Meditation by

The Rev. Matthew J. Moretz, *Associate Rector*

“It Is Finished”

*Meditation preached at the Three Hour Service 12 noon to 3 o'clock, April 18, 2014
Good Friday, Based on John 19:29-30, 33-37*

There is a certain spiritual maturity that comes in the breakthrough awareness that there's such a thing as a good death. I've officiated at a couple of memorial services this year of people who nearly everyone there recognized had a good death. This is not to say that the end of their life was desired, or welcomed, or met without fear. Far from it. But, it is to say that in their dying, each of them found, were given(?), the power to display a quality of life that shone through the doom and gloom that people expected to descend upon the person as their end drew near.

In both cases, the people died of a deadly disease relatively young, and so the grief was especially acute. But in both cases, they had time, time not given to everyone, time to put their affairs in order, and time to show who they were to those in their life, time to show what they were really made of. One person wrote a book along the way. Another reconnected with an estranged friend. In both cases, everyone who gathered at the services testified to the courage and love that their friends shared, even as they approached their final day. Two churches full of people gathered to say thank you to God for such a marvelous thing.

The thing is, these two people identified with the church, but they weren't particularly religious. And what they pulled off for the people in their lives, a good and inspiring death, I can tell you, didn't happen on its own. In their last days, all of their strength was demanded of them. And it required much commitment and dedication to see their values through to the end. One person spoke about how he would set aside only a certain part of the day for his own grief and tears, and that the rest of the day was for his friends and family. I don't want to sugarcoat it. It was the worst, truly the worst situation that they had ever experienced, but in that pain, they chiseled out a space for love, a space where it wasn't all about them, but also about the other people in their lives. They loved with a judicious rigor, made all the more possible, I believe, by the vivid sense that they had a finish line, and it was just around the corner. And in that rigorous love, they fashioned a final chapter, a good death, that completed and fulfilled a good life, such that the life and the death, the whole kit and kaboodle, entered almost seamlessly into a larger life, with God and with the people they loved, that continued even after the last heartbeat.

Our friend Jesus, he knew that he was going to die. It didn't take a fortune teller to predict that. From the beginning, he knew. Take the first sermon he ever preached in his hometown: It infuriated his friends and family so much that they nearly threw him off a cliff. But Jesus escaped. And so his ministry in exile began with the full awareness that he would be killed if he lived it out fully. He didn't want to die. God didn't want him to die. It was others who did. Others who couldn't stand the mercy he showed to people who didn't deserve it, to their thinking; his healing of people whom they thought their God had cursed for good reason; his disrupting a social order that they thought God had made. God didn't desire Jesus' blood. People did.

For Jesus was just so extraordinarily good at what he did. He could preach and teach, using these memorable stories and sayings that spread like wildfire. No one could stop them. He could heal and transform lives with his mercy and touch. He forgave people that no one wanted forgiven. And people made all kinds of connections with the religious tradition, seeing continuity, illumination, and fulfillment of ancient streams of history with God. He could gather great crowds, some who would have gladly raised an army for him, with him as king, which really unsettled the powerful.

In all this, he couldn't help but provoke white-hot anger. This was the cost of living the truth. Parading the truth among powerful people who had gone all in on certain lies, and who would be willing to kill to defend that stack.

Jesus had to be careful. He had to be clever. He had to guard himself from being stoned to death in a frenzy, or disappeared, or tricked into a rhetorical trap that would lead to his destruction and his name maligned forever. One of the ways, I think, Jesus stacked the deck in his favor, at least where his safety was concerned, was that he sent out his disciples two by two to see if a village would accept him—like the Secret Service going ahead of the president to check a place out. The disciples, through their preaching and teaching, would find out in short order if it was dangerous. And if it was, they would shake the dust off their feet, and Jesus would be sure to take another route in his ministry. This wasn't cowardice. It was a fully-aware choice. I think Jesus came to understand that if he were going to die, a backwater lynching just wouldn't do. One of his great epiphanies was his "setting his face toward Jerusalem," and his conviction that he had to go there, to the center of the system, to the geographical center of his faith, God's Temple Mount, now a vital node of an evil Empire blanketing the world. It was there that he was meant to be who he was, not bowing to the threats, to suffer and die. And then be raised, somehow. Taking his ministry to Jerusalem, to the city that kills the prophets, this was going to change everything.

It was here that the disciples really started to push back. They didn't get it. They fought over it. Even Jesus struggled in the night, often in prayer alone, agonizing over saying yes, day by day, wrestling with this path that would have him living the truth of God to the hilt, and, as a result, would lead to a city, an army, his own people, and his friends, chewing him to bits and spitting him out, with extreme prejudice.

It is so hard for me to fathom the rigorous love and dedication that Jesus brought to the table to see this through to the end with a good death. To live God's life, with this magisterial finish, even from the nailing post, with all that he had left, taking the energy to pronounce these sputtering words. That even from that horrible rack he could pray, agonizing prayers, yes, despairing prayers, yes, but prayers all the same. That he could forgive those who were killing him. That he could put his affairs in order with his mother. That he could share fellowship with one of the condemned at his side. And then to voice a simple and memorable word that he had done what he came here to do, and that he was in God's hands now. "It is finished." Some interpreters say that this was a moment of triumph, but for me, it is hard to see a spirit of triumph getting anywhere near Golgotha. For me, I hope that this was a moment of sheer relief for Jesus. A time of holy release after such a hard road.