

SEEDS OF LIFE

(Psalm 22:1-2, 18-23, 26-29)

Plea for Deliverance from Suffering and Hostility

¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

² O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.

¹⁸ they divide my clothes among themselves,
and for my clothing they cast lots.

¹⁹ But you, O Lord, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid!

²⁰ Deliver my soul from the sword,
my life from the power of the dog!

²¹ Save me from the mouth of the lion!

From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.

²² I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:

²³ You who fear the Lord, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;
stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!

²⁶ The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the Lord.
May your hearts live for ever!

²⁷ All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the Lord;
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before him.

²⁸ For dominion belongs to the Lord,
and he rules over the nations.

**29 To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
and I shall live for him.**

(John 19:16-30)

The Crucifixion of Jesus

16Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.

So they took Jesus; ¹⁷and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. ¹⁸There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them. ¹⁹Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.' ²⁰Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek. ²¹Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, 'Do not write, "The King of the Jews", but, "This man said, I am King of the Jews." ' ²²Pilate answered, 'What I have written I have written.' ²³When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took his tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. ²⁴So they said to one another, 'Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see who will get it.' This was to fulfil what the scripture says, 'They divided my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.'

25And that is what the soldiers did.

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' ²⁷Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

28 After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), 'I am thirsty.' ²⁹A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. ³⁰When Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is finished.' Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Good evening, everyone!

Thank you for joining us for Good Friday Service. Thanks to Pastor Jackeline Vives for inviting me to preach here at Wesley UMC. It's a beautiful sanctuary! Also, thanks to Pastor Eric Schmidt from Corona UMC for joining us.

This week, or the next week, might be one of the most devastating and grimmest weeks for the people of the United States, due to the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. According to the local newspaper's headlines, these two weeks will be "Hardest and Saddest Weeks" in U.S. History.

Significantly, the Jewish Passover celebrations and the Christian Holy Week and Easter are overlapping. However, unlike many previous years, this year, health authorities have asked people of faith to stay at home -- no more physical gatherings, no more community celebrations -- and no more in person fellowship.

We know the history of Passover. It is THE most important Jewish celebration. It tells the 3,000-year-old story of God's salvation of the Israelites from Egypt.

Remember the tenth and final plague -- the Death of the Firstborn -- that fell upon all the Egyptians? As we helplessly watch the horrific news of more than a thousand people dying within a 24-hour period, it feels like we are in a horror movie or a nightmare.

Yeah, just as the people of Israel did to escape from the "**destroyer**," we desperately want to paint the "**blood of the Passover lamb**" all over our homes to keep from the deadly coronavirus!

Yes, we are sad and anxious. We are walking through the valley of the shadow of death. We are walking in darkness, fear, and uncertainty. That's our reality now. On Good Friday, the most solemn day of the Christian Year.

It is the day of Jesus' crucifixion. Depending on the origins of the language, Good Friday is also called "Holy and Great Friday," "Sorrowful Friday," or "God's Friday." Whatever you call it, Good Friday leads us to reflect on the meaning of death and life.

During Lent, my Bible study class at First UMC has been reading an inspiring book entitled, **The Last Week**, written by the theologian Marcus J. Borg and the Catholic priest John Dominic Crossan.

I think this book is one of the best books written about Holy Week, from Palm Sunday through Easter Sunday. I highly recommend this book. People from the class are telling me that they are glad to have it to read at home.

I was stunned to learn many new insights from the book. About Good Friday, the authors wrote:

"According to Mark, Jesus did not die FOR the sin of the world... But in an important sense, he was killed BECAUSE of the sin of the world. It was the injustice of domination systems that killed him, injustice so routine that it is part of the normalcy of civilization... thus Jesus was crucified because of the sin of the world." (pp. 162-163)

Jesus showed the way of love. Jesus preached the Kingdom of God. Jesus pursued God's passion for justice. Jesus came to share God's heart that is full of love, grace, and mercy, with us!

However, the human wickedness, corruption, and darkness crucified him on the cross. Good Friday is, therefore, the result of the collision between Jesus the human injustice.

Even though Jesus, as a human, didn't want to confront what was happening to him, yet, as the Son of God, he chose to continue loving people -- no matter what.

From the Book of Matthew, we know how Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Matthew 26:39

'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.'

Then, he prays again: V. 42, **'My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.'**

It was not a suicide mission for Jesus. He didn't just choose to jump in the lake of fire to die. Jesus truly struggled when faced with the darkest time to come.

In the Book of Luke, we hear a slightly different account of Jesus' Prayer of Gethsemane.

⁴²'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.'

That is followed by two additional, yet significant, verses with double brackets: **[[⁴³Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. ⁴⁴In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.]]** Jesus cried out to the heavenly Father, for an uncertain and fearful time was coming.

Jesus knew and prayed Psalm 22

¹My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? ²O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.

It was a desperate plea for deliverance from suffering. Jesus was in agony and despair and pain.

Yet, he did not run away. He did not turn away from the cup of pain. Because Jesus knew God's heart, for it was his heart as well.

The book **The Last Week** mentions the amazing story in Genesis about Joseph. His brothers, out of envy, sold Joseph into slavery. To make a long story short, Joseph ends up as they second highest ruler of Egypt.

When a famine attacked the land, including his hometown Canaan, his brothers came to Egypt to seek food for survival. Joseph, eventually, met them. They were understandably scared because Joseph was now powerful, and they knew what horrible things they had done to him. Joseph held their lives in his hand.

Here is what he said to his brothers:

Genesis 45:5 & 7

⁵And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life... ⁷God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors.

Joseph repeatedly asserts that **"God sent me."** Was it God's will that Joseph become a slave? No. Never!

That was Joseph's affirmation of his faith. Even in misery, God was with him. By God's grace, Joseph became "somebody" who could save his own family from the famine.

Joseph had gone through such an ordeal. Yet, by God's grace and presence, he kept his faith in God. Even though he had the power to take revenge on his brothers, he chose to forgive them.

He gave thanks to God for his opportunity to have reconciliation with his brothers. He gave thanks to God for taking this wickedness, and using it for good.

Romans 8:28

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

God is not always intervening or rearranging our evil decisions. However, even in the worst situations, if we continue to love and trust God, all things can work together!

The book is asking this question: "Was the death of Jesus the will of God?" The answer: "No. It is never the will of God that a righteous man be crucified."

Jesus was killed by the society's domination system of injustice in his time. Jesus was killed by the series of evil decisions made by people against God's heart. Jesus was killed by the whole world, in a more spiritual sense, by you and me.

From the Gospel of John, Jesus cried out **"It is finished,"** then, he passed away. **"It is finished"** is the English translation of the Greek word *Tetelestai* in the perfect tense.

This is very important to notice, because it means that "This happened and it is still in effect today." The last word of Jesus **"it is finished"** is different from "I'm done" or "I'm finished" or "my mission is accomplished." It's more than that.

According to many Bible scholars, Jesus meant: "It was finished in the past, it is still finished in the present, and it will remain finished in the future."

It was a gloomy and frightful Friday because of the death of Jesus. However, God made his sorrowful death turn into something amazing, wonderful, glorious, not just for Jesus himself but also for the whole world. It's the gift of the Resurrection -- it's New Life!

We sang "O How He Loves You and Me" at the beginning of the service. The second stanza goes like this: *Jesus to Calvary did go / his love for sinners to show / What he did there brought hope from despair.*

Yes, Jesus brings you hope from despair. Jesus gives you New Life from death.

So, even though you are surrounded by death, including a worldwide pandemic. And even though you are mortal and frail, do not be afraid.

John 12:24, 26

²⁴Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

²⁶Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

A seed must die and be planted so that it can bear much fruit -- a new life!

In Matthew chapter 16, Jesus is foretelling his death and resurrection to his beloved disciples. However, no one is taking his words seriously. They appear not to be engaging in this solemn conversation with their Master and Lord.

Then, after rebuking Peter, Jesus clearly tells his disciples: Matthew 16:24-25:

“²⁴If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it...”

Of course, Jesus' words are addressed to his own disciples. However, his words are also being addressed to us, you and me, who truly and sincerely try to follow Jesus.

Just as Jesus is heading to face the way of the cross, even though he also is expecting a great deal of human agony and suffering, we, too, can follow him, trying to be bold and strong rather than being afraid.

Tonight, Good Friday, we are facing not only the death of Jesus but also our own death. There is a very old Latin saying: “Memento Mori.” It means: “Remember that you will die.”

Yes, we are mortal beings. Everyone dies – soon or later. We have 100% mortality.

As a matter of fact, recently, we have been thinking about our own death more than ever these days because of the Coronavirus.

In the story of Passover, the Israelites' firstborns were able to escape from death -- how? Because of the blood of Passover lamb! The destroyer passed over the homes of the Israelites. However, the coronavirus seems to be worse. Anyone could become a victim from this deadly virus disease.

We always claim we are living. But, technically, we are dying every day.

Think about this: A baby is born to live. Right? But at the same time, the baby is born to die.

So, since we realize that we are dying, sooner or later, we must bear good fruits while trying to live a more meaningful life. Your life is the most precious gift from God.

So, all the choices you are going to make now will determine the rest of your life. Will it be a life-giving life? Will your planted seeds bear much fruit? Or will it be a life of regrets and resentments?

Let us pay attention to Psalm 22. Even though the Psalm begins with a desperate plea for deliverance, it ends with praise.

**22 I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:**

**26 The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the Lord.
May your hearts live for ever!**

God's steadfast love always wins. God's faithfulness endures forever. God's grace is beyond our imaginations and comprehensions.

Sometimes, seeds appear to be dead -- nothing happens and looks lifeless. However, when planted and exposed to God's Light and Living Water, those seeds will sprout and give new life, new meaning and new perspectives. We have new hope when we make our priority following Jesus.

My Brothers and Sisters in Christ! My friends in Christ!

The Good Friday story alone is incomplete. The Good Friday story is on "To-Be Continued" mode. Because -- the best thing is yet to come.

It's Friday! But, Sunday is coming!

Though we walk in the valley of the shadow of death, nothing, absolutely nothing, **"will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord."** (Romans 8:39)

You and I have this Eternal Hope in God because we are faithfully and continually planting the seeds of life.

Thanks be to God! **Amen!**