

A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished." And he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. Since it was the day of Preparation, and so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they be taken away. So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him. but when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. He who saw it has borne witness - his testimony is true and he knows he is telling the truth - that you also might believe. For these things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled: "Not one of his bones will be broken." And again another Scripture says, "They will look on him whom they have pierced." After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away the body of Jesus. Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy five pounds in weight. So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices as is the burial custom of the Jews. Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.

John 19:29-42

"Blood and Water, and a Tomb in a Garden"

Pastor Stephen Ridge

Many of the events we have read about these last two months in John's gospel were strangely foreseen by a prophet who, 500 years before Christ, lived on the same hilltop where Jesus would die, a man who helped lay the foundation for the same city where Jesus would be welcomed as Israel's king one Sunday morning, and then be executed with common criminals on Friday the same week. The prophet Zechariah was born in Babylon, but, 500 years before Christ, Zechariah went home to help rebuild the holy city and to give God's people there an early glimpse of the Savior who one day would die on the same hilltop where they worked.

It was Zechariah who first sang of Jesus riding across the Kidron Valley on a donkey colt. Not a warrior king like his ancestor David, but Zechariah saw Jesus as a Prince of Peace, more like Solomon who ruled all of Western Asia from the Euphrates to the Mediterranean, but never conquered anyone, never fought in a single battle. It was Zechariah, 500 years before Christ, who first saw that Jesus would be betrayed for *"thirty pieces of silver"*, a rejected Shepherd whose disciples would desert him on the night he went under arrest. *"Strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered."* Zechariah sang in chapter 13 of a book loaded with pictures and visions, each one pointing from a different angle toward a future centered around Jesus.

Last week in John's gospel we saw Jesus die, faintly singing from a different songbook even older than Zechariah, Psalm 22, where David had foreseen that Jesus would die with his *"hands"* and *"feet...pierced,"* the same psalm where David had sung that strangers would *"divide his garments...cast lots for his clothing."* Psalm 69, where Jesus took a long draught of *"sour wine"* and declared that his work was *"finished"* and the kingdom was in. Psalm 31, where Jesus allowed himself to die and gave his *"spirit"* into his Father's care, knowing that his work was done and we'll be saved if we'll only believe in his love and trust his forgiveness.

The point being that no accidents happened on that day, not a note that Jesus sang went false, not a thing that Jesus promised went unfulfilled. And so, as the sun wound down toward the horizon and everyone kosher began to think of the Passover Sabbath the next day, the temple authorities sent to Pilate and sought orders to have the crucifixion shut down and the bodies taken out of sight before the sun set and the Sabbath was in. The typical, brutal way to make that happen was to break the prisoners' legs because they couldn't breathe on a cross without raising themselves on the nails with their feet.

But that couldn't happen to Jesus because Jesus was a Passover sacrifice, *"...the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"* John the Baptist had called him. And Moses had commanded about the Passover Lamb that: *"Not one of his bones will be broken."* So the soldiers approached his cross with the mallet ready, but they were waved off, because he was already dead. Instead, one of the executioners ran his spear into Jesus' chest, just to be sure, and John solemnly tells us that *"at once there came out blood and water."* It is an event of some significance to John because he goes on to exclaim: *"He who saw it has borne witness - his testimony is true and he knows he is telling the truth - that you also might believe."*

Now the importance John attaches to the issue of blood and water together from the Lord's chest is hard for modern readers to understand. Some have wanted to see John as offering us proof positive that Jesus was physically there and actually died. They think that, when he wrote his gospel, John was reacting to Greek philosophers who wanted to idealize Jesus as a purely spiritual being, not really part of this world, not really Someone who could be felt or touched or harmed. And John does in his first letter insist that Jesus had a body, came *"in the flesh."* Other modern readers have read John's words and launched into macabre speculation about what caused Jesus' death based on what came from his chest.

But I think John has something more spiritual in mind than anything like that. Listen to what John writes about Jesus in his first letter to the churches, he says: *"This is he who came by the water and the blood - Jesus Christ, not by the water only, but by the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify, the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree."* And all God's people said, "What in the world are you talking about?"

Well, I don't think this talk about water, blood, and Spirit is directed at any Greek philosophers, but rather I think John has in mind the Old Testament background that sets the stage for so much of what Jesus said and what Jesus did. In High School Sunday School, we are studying the life of Moses who at the Burning Bush was commanded by God to announce that God would soon free his people from Egyptian slavery. *"What if they don't believe me?"* Moses whined to God, *"What if they won't listen?"*

So God gave Moses three miracles to perform, and the last, the best of the miracles was to take water from the Nile, splash it on the ground, and the water would turn to blood on the pavement. Frankly, it's not that impressive a sign. It's not given, I don't think, for the wow factor. Rather, I think, the miracle is given as a picture for God's people just how God would go about saving them as time went on. Because when God did free them from their slavery and got them to Mount Sinai, Moses would teach them a covenant which had as its two pillars, ritual washing with water, and ritual sacrifices with the shedding of blood.

So water would become the means by which God purified his people from whatever defiled them, In Moses's Law, there was a different bath for every problem, and they could be forgiven for their sins only after something else, Someone else, satisfied God's justice by dying in their place. So at the very start of John's gospel, John the Baptist identifies Jesus two ways. Christ is, John announced, *"the Lamb of God"* that blood sacrifice who would buy forgiveness, *"take away the sin of the world."*

And at Jesus' baptism in the water, John saw the Spirit descend on Jesus and remembered that God had told him: *"He on whom you see the Spirit descend...this is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit."* And throughout John's gospel, Jesus is careful to teach that what water does to cleanse and refresh our bodies, God's Spirit does to cleanse and refresh our souls. *"Whoever believes in me...Out of his heart will flow springs of living water."* Jesus taught God's people in the holy city the Fall before he died. And now John stands under the Cross and sees flowing from the wound in Jesus' side both water and blood, and, "There it is!" he says to himself, another sign that in Jesus is both the blood that buys forgiveness and the Spirit who makes us clean and new.

In our Call to Worship this morning, Zechariah shows us Jesus at his lowest and most vulnerable, slain and pierced, exposed to everyone's view on the Cross. To the Jewish mind, Jesus was quintessentially cursed in that moment. Zechariah imagines the whole family line of David stricken with grief at the sight, all of Israel, every family distraught at the sight of Israel's king in such a state. Yet at the same time, Zechariah sings of *"a fountain opened for the house of David and... Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin."*

And from that lowest moment, things begin to look up. The kingdom is in and scurrying out from their hiding places come two unlikely disciples, timid men, who make bold before the governor and who then proceed to treat Jesus in death like the king he was in life. He is buried like royalty, covered with elaborate perfume and spices in a tomb surrounded by garden, such regal splendor after such total humiliation. To enter the place, you might think you were in Eden, if only there were a living Gardener there with his Bride. But who knows? *"With God anything is possible."*