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Rye Presbyterian Church
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Good Friday Meditation

What is it that happened today? Why are we here today?

Well, on one level, nothing has happened that has not happened far too many times before today and that will happen far too many times after today. A man has been unjustly condemned and executed. A man has been tortured in the name of empire. A good man has been betrayed and executed because he was willing to speak the truth that threatens the power of the powerful and the truth about all of us that we would rather not hear. A prophet has once again been slain. It happened to Isaiah, it happened to Socrates, it happened to early Christian martyrs and to martyrs who sought to reform the church, and even more recently to martyrs who sought to expose and erase slavery and racism. It will undoubtedly happen again.

But according to the biblical writers something more than just the usual sickening injustice was going on this afternoon. Isaiah had once prophesied that this man of sorrows would bear all our iniquities, and this one who was crushed would make many righteous. The writers of the New Testament are unanimous in saying that this was exactly what happened today. All those writers saw Jesus as the one who, on the cross, reconciled heaven and earth. Each has, also, added something particular to that general assertion. For example, the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews saw the crucified Jesus as the pioneer of our faith, the one who tasted death for everyone, and who then passed into the heavens, a great high priest who, sympathizing with our weakness, is able to intercede for us with the Father, and who is one from whom we may receive mercy and will find grace to help in time of need. St. John, for his part, saw in Jesus' final words, "It is finished," an assertion not that it was over, that the game was up, but that the work he had

set out to do was completed and perfected as in his tortured outstretched arms he welcomed all the world into the light, even though many would prefer the darkness. St. Paul saw in his death the defeat of the powers of sin and death that had ruled human life. In our baptism into his death, Paul tells us that we are now set free to live in his resurrection. St. Paul succinctly says: "In him was the all fullness of God pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross." And so it is for all these reasons that last of all John saw in his apocalyptic vision the lamb slain as one sitting on the throne of heaven and earth, for his is the one who by his blood has ransomed saints from every people and language and nation, a royal household of priests to serve our God. And, John has proclaimed, for this he is worthy to receive power and wealth, wisdom and might and glory and honor and blessing.

But how has this death reconciled heaven and earth? How has this death done all these things?

That it has, is something that the church has always been unanimous about. *How* it has, though, is something on which the church, in fact, has no declared official doctrine. It has entertained a lot of opinions, some of them even pretty good. Over the course of the centuries, numerous theologians have explained the "how" in numerous different ways, as well they should.

Let me, however, point out one shortcoming of nearly all theories of the atonement. The problem is that in the way that they are held by most people, all the action goes on *outside* human hearts. For example, this is a grave problem in the theory where we assert that in Christ's death a debt was paid, and that we do not have to pay it. Fair enough, yet all the action is about a transaction between God and God that we watch, and somehow benefit from. Yet we never seem

to be involved in it. So exactly, we have to ask, how do we benefit from it? How, more even exactly, does that reconcile *us* with God? How does that make *us* a royal household of priests to serve our God, a holy people? That is, after all, what God really wants, and what God has said he wants from the beginning. He says little about a debt; but he does say a lot about wanting our love and wanting to restore our lost goodness. So the point here is a simple one: unless what goes on in this death affects us, and makes *us* somehow holy, really holy, there is no reconciliation between heaven and earth, for we will remain in our hearts, unless they are changed, enemies of God. Unless our hearts are changed somehow by this death, we will continue to slaughter the prophets, and we will continue to execute Jesus every day from now until the end of the world.

The problem, however, may not be so much with theories as such; the problem is that *we* leave our hearts out of it. We don't put them into the equation, and we don't put ourselves personally into what is going. We don't because too often we are afraid to put ourselves into the action. We would rather be spectators and let it happen outside us. But that will not do because it means that nothing then does happen for us.

So today as we ask ourselves what happened today let us put that question first to our hearts. First, let us ask how we have betrayed Christ, and how we have denied him. Let us ask how we have fled from his side when he needed friends, even though we have always expected that he should stay at our side. And when we have asked that, let us ask ourselves why we need his grace, let us ask why *we* need to be reconciled to heaven and to our neighbors. The answer should start to become clearer.

But let us also not only ask ourselves these questions. Let us finally also simply silence ourselves and let us now watch and wait. Let us pray, and by that I do not mean the sort of

prayer that Jesus warned us against as being like the prayer of pagans, the prayer where we do a lot of talking. I mean let us pray the sort of prayer, let us have the sort of conversation with God in which the only talking we do is asking to hear his voice. Let us pray by listening, and by letting his Word -- Christ the Word -- enter into our hearts. Let us watch the cross and keep it imaginatively in front of our minds. Let us for once stand by him in his agony. And if we are willing to do that, we can be assured that he will stand by us. And we can be sure that as with the psalmist who watched the man who said "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" we will be able to say, "I will live for him...and I will proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that "he has done it."