

"A Word from the Cross: Covenant"

As we come to the sixth word from Jesus on the cross, I will remind you that the previous words that have been spoken were words given to us in grace. A word of forgiveness; a word to teach us how to build community after Jesus left us; words of hope, trust and understanding. At first glance, Jesus' cry about his thirst seems to be the only word truly spoken out of his own need. A rare moment of self-centeredness.

But have *you* ever been thirsty? Of course, you have. Well try to remember the time that you wanted water more than anything in your life. It may have been on the opening day of a Clemson (or South Carolina) football season, where the Labor Day humidity combined with the excitement of the long day, has your throat completely parched. Or after a long hike in the mountains, when your water bottle has been dry during the last mile. Or after finishing a marathon or 5K run for your favorite charity.

In 2008, my husband and I were blessed to visit the Holy Land, including a side trip to the lost city of Petra in Jordan. The average temperature in May is only in the mid '80's but the area is 90% desert. The whole city is built out of sandstone and is located deep within a canyon of hills. The only way to get in is to walk, down a seemingly gentle slope. It is so dusty and dry that we were told to wear really old shoes and clothes that we didn't care about. I actually ended up throwing my shirt away!

After spending all day in this amazing, forgotten city, climbing up dusty pathways into the monastery, ruins of homes, and the steps of the amphitheater **AND** riding a camel, it was time to leave. Well friends that is when we found out that the gentle slope that we walked in on was not so gentle walking out. The best way to ascend was to zig-zag the road. And it was only

the promise of the little convenience store at the top of the hill that sold COLD water bottles that got me out!

But this would have been nothing compared to the thirst that Jesus experienced as he hung on the cross, broken and bleeding on our behalf. However, it is really important for us to understand the context that John wrote his Gospel in to discover what Jesus meant when he offered this, "I am thirsty!"

John states that Jesus made the cry "I am thirsty" to fulfill the Scriptures, and that is true. In Psalm 69, King David says about the enemies that are pursuing him: "I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God. They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink." All good Jews standing at the foot of the cross would have known the source of these words and that God had rescued David.

But as I said, let's look at the context of the whole gospel of John. Most scholars believe, as I do, that John was the only Gospel writer who gave an eyewitness account of Jesus' life on earth. And in this matter of thirst, his account of Jesus' death is completely different from the other Gospels. Matthew, Mark and Luke have Jesus being offered the wine on a sponge in a taunting way but refusing it. But only John has Jesus ask for it.

Children of Yahweh would have known well the passage in Isaiah that we just heard that was delivered to the Exiles in Babylon. They were spoken to remind God's chosen people of the covenant that God had made with their ancestors. God made this promise to the people of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob many years earlier: "I will be your God and you will be my people."

Isaiah reminded the children of God that we are *still* covenant people by telling them, "When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the LORD will answer them." And because John wrote his Gospel about 70 years AFTER Jesus'

death and resurrection, people had started to forget what Jesus had promised. They may not have been feeling the presence of the Holy Spirit among the persecution that they faced in the new church. They, too, may have forgotten that they were covenant people!

So John reminded them that HIS PERSONAL MEMORY was of Jesus repeating the words, "I thirst" so they would recall that Yahweh did not abandon his children in Babylon. And God would not abandon them in Jerusalem so that they could believe and spread the Good News of grace with God's help. God was still present in the newly-formed church, helping them tell others what it means to be covered by this covenant.

In the same way, God has not abandoned us. So when we turn on the news and hear of another senseless shooting in a nightclub, we can say, "I thirst for people to seek peaceful ways to disagree rather than simply reaching for a gun." When we read of the tragic deaths of 13 people on a church bus because the young person driving the pickup truck that hit them head on was texting while driving, we can say, "I thirst for people to truly value life. Help us value life as well." And we can be assured that God still honors the covenant made to us all, even when God seems absent. Remembering how long God has kept the covenant gives us hope that we are STILL God's people.

So while we live among thoughtlessness, violence, hunger, homelessness, addiction and other struggles, Jesus' word, "I thirst" encourages *us* to keep on thirsting for righteousness and goodness. And the reminder that we are covenant people gives us hope for the day when God's kingdom really will come and God's will can be done, as we pray for each week in the Lord's Prayer.

Another detail that John gives us in his account that reminds us of our gifts as covenant people is that he makes a point to tell us that the wine offered to Jesus on a sponge was lifted to

his mouth on a branch of hyssop. Now in reality, hyssop is a small, bushy plant and it would be almost impossible to attach a sponge to it, so it is more likely that the sponge was on a stick as the other Gospels tell us.

But I believe John *reported* that it was a hyssop branch because, as believers in the new church made up of Jews and Christians, his audience would again have understood the significance and promise that it represented. According to John's Gospel, Jesus was crucified during Passover. The Jews at the cross would have just reenacted the defining moment in their history when the angel of death killed the firstborn in every Egyptian household but "passed over" the Hebrew homes because of the blood on their doorpost.

The writer of Exodus tells us that each Hebrew was to take the blood of an unblemished lamb that had been sacrificed to God, dip in it a HYSSOP branch and shake the blood on the doorpost to keep the covenant people within the house safe. And speaking of sacrifice, in the Old Testament we read that the priests took hyssop and dipped it into water, sometimes mixed with blood or ashes to purify someone who had been cleansed of sin. John's words emphasize not only Jesus' physical thirst but our Spiritual thirst for the kind of cleansing that only God can give.

But the strongest reminder that this word from Jesus was a symbol of our covenant status is that ONLY in John's Gospel is Jesus referred to as "The Lamb of God." In the Old Testament, the Hebrews were asked to sacrifice unblemished lambs on the altar to atone for their sins. ONLY JOHN'S GOSPEL makes the point that Jesus' death takes place while the lambs were being slaughtered at the Temple. In this way, he reminds us that Jesus is the Lamb of God and the New Covenant as well. Because Jesus thirsted for God's will to be done, we do not have to bring little animals to church each week to atone for everything we have done wrong since last

Sunday. When Jesus entered the arms of his Father after his death, God exclaimed, "Finally, a sacrifice that is acceptable."

That is why I planned for us to hear this word from Jesus, "I am thirsty" on the day when we observe the Lord's Supper. Jesus Christ IS our New Covenant. His blood was shed on the cross in pain and suffering because God knows that, after every opportunity that his children have been given to live up to the Covenant, we cannot. We have learned in Confirmation Class that God made a covenant with Moses. He said to Moses on Mt. Sinai when the Law was given, "Now, if you obey me completely and keep my covenant, you will be my treasured possession among all peoples, though all the earth is mine" (Exodus 19:5).

But try as we might, you and I cannot keep that Covenant. We do not honor the Sabbath. We do not always honor our parents. While we try to speak the truth with our lips, we often lie with our hearts. We steal in ways that we do not mean to and covet our friend's younger body, naturally curly hair, bigger house and faster car. And we just can't help ourselves because we are merely human.

But in spite of our sins, God loves us. God loves YOU and ME. God WANTS to spend eternity in our presence. And so recognizing the faults of the first covenant, he let his Son thirst on the cross for the righteousness and obedience that would pave the way to our salvation. The very human Jesus thirsted because of our sinfulness and the Divine Jesus offered his own blood to quench our thirst.

So as we come to the Table today, remember the covenant. And remember the cost. Because every sin, every thoughtless act or intentional transgression. Every forbidden fruit that we have tasted and every prayer that we have offered to be better than we are but have not been

able to achieve on our own, has been covered in the blood of our Risen Savior. And the thirst of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit has been quenched for all time. Amen.

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