

SERVICE OF TENEBRAE

Introductory Comments

We welcome you to this special Maundy Thursday worship service. The Tenebrae service is one of the oldest traditions of the Christian Church in celebration of Holy Week. From the Latin word meaning “shadow”, the service of Tenebrae presents the story of Jesus’ passion, and, as the account unfolds, the symbolic candles are extinguished and the sanctuary is darkened to dramatize the death of our Lord.

The Symbols

The center candle is the “Christ Candle”. The seven black candles represent the Seven Last Words of Christ from the cross. The service will end in total darkness and we will exit silently as we remember our Savior’s death.

The Setting

More than 1900 years ago on a hill called Calvary outside the city of Jerusalem, a man named Jesus suffered and died on a cruel cross for each of us. We gather tonight to sit at the foot of the cross, along with the guarding soldiers and the jeering crowd, and to look at them man with the nails in His hands and feet and the crown of thorns on His head. Tonight, we hear His last words from the cross and remember the way that He died.

First Narration

Loril

Hear the Word of Forgiveness: There were two others that were led away to be put to death with Him. And when they came to the place which is called “the skull”, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left. And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:32-34) Jesus taught that one should forgive seventy times seven and asked that His followers pray to be forgiven as they forgave others.

Everett

While meditating upon this first word from the cross, let us close our minds to everything except Calvary. Pictures we have seen will help guide our foggy imaginations as we attempt to visualize the scene. See the crowds. Hear the jeering shouts. Feel the press of the gathered masses. Taste and smell the agonies of pain and death. For meditation, let us think of ourselves, not one of us without sin, as part of that crowd which needed forgiveness. Let us hear His voice saying to us, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

(Loril pause; then extinguish one black candle)

Second Narrator

Loril

Hear the Word of Salvation: One of the criminals who was also hanged kept deriding Jesus, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked the first, saying, "Do you not fear God since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? Are we, indeed, justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds while this man has done nothing wrong." Then the second man said "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." Jesus then responded, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise." (Luke 23:39-43)

Everett

As we hear this second word from the cross, let us exercise our God-given imaginations in attempting to see,, hear, feel and experience Calvary. We shall look above the crowds and see the thieves, one at Jesus' right and the other at His left. We shall hear the words of the thief who answered his companion's taunts with that wonderful expression of faith in Jesus. Hear, and see, the callous response of the crowd and the reaction of Jesus' friends, those few who heard the promise He made to the dying thief. If we were there in the crowd, what would we say? What would we think or feel? What would we hear and know and see? Would we hear Jesus' words, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise?"

(Loril pause, then extinguish one black candle)

Third Narrator

Loril

Hear the Word of Compassion: Standing by the cross of Jesus were His mother and His mother's sister, Mary, the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw His mother and the disciple whom He loved standing near, He said to His mother, "Behold your son!" Then He said to the disciple, "Behold your mother!" And from that hour, the disciple took her to His own home. (John 19:25-27)

Everett

Jesus' attention here is directed to Mary, His mother, and to John, His friend. Jesus had identified them in the midst of that hostile crowd, and from within the fog of his pain. May God direct us as we attempt, during these next few moments, to see Mary and John and to feel something of their inescapable and indescribable grief. See all four of those faithful friends. Hear the calls of derision around them. Feel the hostility of the crowd. Then think of yourself as actually being there. Hear, above all the noise, Jesus' words to His mother, "Behold, your son!" and to his friend, "Behold, your mother!"

(Loril pause, then extinguish one black candle)

Fourth Narrator

Loril

Hear the Word of Loneliness: Now from the sixth hour, there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour, and about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?” (Matthew 27:45-46). This is a most unusual word from the cross, but, curiously, it may be thought of as a cry of victory, for the words quote the opening lines of Psalm 22, a cry of anguish and a psalm of praise over God’s ultimate triumph.

Everett

During this time of meditation, let each of us try to visualize the frightening darkness that had fallen upon the land, to hear the raucous and terrified crowd, to feel the pressures without and within, and, finally, to hear the cry from the center cross, “My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken Me?”

(Loril pause, then extinguish one black candle)

Fifth Narrator

Loril

Hear the Word of Suffering: After this, Jesus, knowing that all was finished, said, “I thirst”. A bowl full of vinegar stood there, so they put a sponge full of the vinegar on hyssop and held it to His mouth. (John 19:28-39) This cry of human agony came from One who had told a woman of Samaria the He could give her a “spring of water welling up to eternal life!”

Everett

Again, let us place ourselves in the scene. Possibly the crowd had thinned a bit. Those who were merely curious or who received a thrill from others’ suffering had left for the comfort of their homes and community. See the soldiers still guarding the execution process now casting lots for His clothes. See the dying men and hear the Son of Man whose lips were doubtless swollen and painful; whose tongue has thickened and dried. Taste the terrible need for cooling water and then, instead, the sour vinegar, as you hear Jesus say, “I thirst”.

(Loril pause, then extinguish one black candle)

Sixth Narrator

Loril

Hear the Word of Triumph: When Jesus had received the vinegar, He said, "It is finished!" and bowed His head and gave up His Spirit. (John 19:30) "It is finished!" His earthly mission was finished, completed and wholly acceptable to God.

Everett

For the next few moments, let us meditate upon these holy moments of Jesus; complete victory. Look upon the cross which will soon be empty for all time. See the scene. Hear and feel the words, "It is finished!"

(Loril pause, then extinguish one black candle)

Seventh Narrator

Loril

Hear the Word of Commitment: "It was now about the sixth hour and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour while the sun's light failed, and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice said, "Father, into Thy hands I commit My spirit." And, having said this, He breathed His last (Luke 23:44-46). The crowd was now probably very small, for Jesus was close to death and the darkness had become intense. Then, suddenly, Jesus broke the stillness of that scene by crying out with a surprisingly loud voice, yielding His spirit to the Father.

For one last time, let us use our imaginations to picture this scene. Jesus is between two dying men, and all three are on crosses. The lingering crowd is fearful of the strange darkness and the quaking earth. Hear and see and taste the bitterness and the wonder. Tired as we may be, clumsy as our visualization of each scene may have been, let us linger at the cross a little longer, listening to Jesus' words, "Father! Into Thy hands I commit my spirit." Having said these words, He breathed His last.

(Everett pause, then extinguish the Christ candle)