"Behold the Son"
John 19:26-27

Lent 1 - February 20, 2002

The Second Word

"Woman, behold your son! Behold your mother!"

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Twenty-five years can be a long time, especially if you're in a place that you don't want to be. Of course, any time can be a long time. Consider the patient awaiting the test results, or undergoing the course of chemotherapy. Consider those with loved ones who are military personnel, sent into harm's way. Consider adult children who care for their infirm parents and watch them slip downhill. Consider those suffering loss, anxiety or depression. Consider those haunted by a past sin that they cannot forget.

I. Ezekiel

Or consider the people of Israel in our Old Testament lesson for this evening. For twenty-five years, they've been away from home, and far from voluntarily. 25 years ago, the Babylonian armies swept through Judah and destroyed Jerusalem. The last time they saw the holy city, it was a wasteland of rubble and flame-nothing left, just devastation. 25 years ago.

It's been a long 25 years because they're strangers in a strange land; but also because of recrimination. They are in Babylon because they blew it. They turned away from the Lord to a bunch of false gods that had no life or way to defend them. They thought they were invincible; after all, they had the temple. And as long as God was in His temple, there was no way that the city would fall. When the walls fell, the temple was vacant; since Judah had forsaken God and wanted nothing to do with Him, the Lord consented to their eviction notice and departed. Jerusalem fell.

Of course, among those captives are some faithful people of God. They trusted Him and worshiped Him throughout the fall of Jerusalem. They confessed their sins and trusted in His promised Savior, still to come. But though their eternal life is certain, their faith has not shielded them from trouble in this world. Despite their trust, they are still captives in Babylon. Despite God's faithfulness, they still suffer.

Is it hopeless? Is this the end? Will Israel be no more? Will their children grow up in Babylon, sacrificed to the morass of immorality and idolatry there? Has God departed forever?

It is to these suffering believers that the prophet Ezekiel speaks comforting words. In a vision, the Lord takes Ezekiel back to the hill of Jerusalem; and in the vision, the city is no longer in ruins. There are buildings, a temple, gates and a wall. And as Ezekiel looks to the East, the Lord returns to His temple. Though many might forsake Him, He does not forsake His people. As His glory fills the temple once more, He declares to Ezekiel (and thus to His people!), "Son of man, this is the place of My throne and the place of the soles of My feet, where I will dwell in the midst of the children of Israel forever." God promises that He has not abandoned them; no, He will be present forever. He

will not always be present in a temple made of stone; when the Savior comes, God will be present with His people in a temple of flesh. God will become man to save His people.

In the meantime, God has still not abandoned His people there in Babylon, of this they can be sure. He's sent Ezekiel to be His prophet; and as the prophet declares the Word of God, God Himself is present there.

The captivity in Babylon will end. Many will even get to go back to Jerusalem and rebuild it. As they do so, they have this assurance; although there is suffering in the world, God has not abandoned them. His promises are sure.

II. Mary and John

Long after that captivity ends, there's another wasteland in Jerusalem. Oh, the walls and the buildings are still standing, and the temple looks stunning once again. But it's still a wasteland-a wasteland of faith. Once again, nearly all the people there have turned away from the one true God. They would say otherwise, because this is an insidious idol which controls them-self-righteousness. They believe that they are pleasing God because of the things that they do. They are good in His sight because they do good things.

It's a common false god, this idea that people earn God's favor by being good. But it always leads people to trust in themselves more than God; and it leads them to love themselves more than God. And when people love themselves more than God, it is only a matter of time until they hold God in contempt. Consider the people of Jerusalem in our Gospel lesson: Although they believe that they are living a life pleasing to the Lord, they are so turned from Him that they are killing His Son.

Jesus, the Savior, the Son of God, is hanging on a cross.

Not just God's Son; this is Mary's Son, too. Her privilege of being the mother of God has brought her both joy and sorrow. They joys of seeing Jesus grow have been many. There have certainly been a few worries along the way as well. There was the time, soon after His birth, when they had to flee to Egypt because Herod tried to kill Him; or the time when He was twelve and they lost Him in Jerusalem for three days. There was that day when He returned to Nazareth as a teacher, and his hometown neighbors tried to kill Him. Of course, Mary was duly warned; back when she and Joseph took Jesus to the temple on His 40th day, Simeon promised Mary, "A sword will pierce through your own soul also" (Lk. 2:35).

The sword is never more piercing than now, for the mother of Jesus stands below His cross, accompanied by the disciple John. Three hours will never be longer than when a mother watches her Son die in agony.

One might raise the objection: Is this fair? Is it fair that the mother of God must be treated in this way? Where is God, when all of this is happening? Why must Mary's soul be pierced, this faithful maidservant of the Lord?

As Mary stands at the foot of the cross, Jesus speaks a second time. The first time was to pray for His enemies. This time, He speaks for the good of His mother; even on the cross, the Son obeys the 4th commandment. "Woman," He says, "Behold your son." "Son," He says to John, "Behold your

mother." And from that day, John takes Mary into his own home to care for her.

But, why John? There are other brothers of Jesus around, far more closely related to Mary. Why is John given the task of caring for Mary?

Because John is a disciple, called by Jesus and taught by Jesus. The Savior is not just concerned that Mary have food to eat and a roof over her head. He wants her comforted with the Word of God. John is to tell Mary what Jesus has taught him about living, life and death. John isn't just Mary's surrogate son, here. The Lord makes him Mary's pastor, because Jesus wants to make sure that His mother hears true hope.

You see, what is true for the captives of Babylon is also true for the mother of Jesus as she stands below the cross. Past all of the sorrow and suffering and woe, this objective truth remains: God is faithful, and He will not abandon His people. How faithful? To the question, "Where is God that day?," we need not look far. He is just above Mary, dying on the cross to take away her sins. Although she suffers dearly that Good Friday afternoon, it is true that the Lord is present with Mary in her suffering; in fact, He is suffering for her so that, though she mourns, she will be comforted.

Of course, Mary is more than just a mother. As we've found in our study of Revelation on Sunday mornings, the mother of Christ is also a symbol of the Church. And as St. Paul declares in tonight's epistle, the Church is the mother of us all. Here, then, is Good News. As Jesus entrusted Mary to an apostle, He also entrusted His Church to the apostles-to the teachings He gave them to teach, to the practices He gave them to do. As long as the Church clings to His Word, she is safe from harm.

Therefore, the Lord still declares to His Church, "Woman, behold your son," and "Son, behold your mother." He calls upon pastors faithfully to continue the ministry that the apostles started; that's why we are part of the one holy Christian and apostolic Church-the "mother of us all." He calls upon all Christians faithfully to hear His Word and receive His Sacraments. For through His Word and Sacraments, Jesus is just as present with His people-body, blood and all; just as He was present on Calvary-body, blood and all. He faithfully remains with His people, just as He promised.

III. Behold The Son

That means, dear Christians, that the Lord faithfully remains with you, just as He promised. We spoke at the beginning of the patient who waits for test results, those with loved ones in harm's way, the adult children who care for infirm parents, those suffering loss, anxiety and guilt. These are just a sampling that proves what is undeniably true: Christians face suffering in this world.

It may not seem fair, and it is a stumbling block to many. After all, redeemed by Christ the King, we are His children and His royal heirs. It is here that the false god of self-righteousness creeps in, for self-righteousness says, "If you're only good enough, you will please God and not suffer. Therefore, if you are suffering, either you aren't good enough for God; or else God has truly abandoned you." Or, "If you'd just work at being good a little harder, that would make the bad go away." Or, in times of peace, it tempts us to say, "Life is good, so I must be doing good before God." Remember the goal of this false god: It is to lead you to love yourself and spurn your Savior. Do not listen to what it has to say.

But the question remains: If we are sons of God and heirs of eternal life, why does such suffering

come along?

Scripture tells us. Remember how the world treated Christ, your King; and do not be surprised that the world treats His Church and His children the same way. The devil, the world and the sinful flesh each paint a target upon you, intending to make you as miserable as they are allowed; they know that you are redeemed, and they wish to make you believe that God does not care, that He has abandoned you. Therefore, there is suffering for the Christian; we must live lives under the cross.

But under the cross isn't such a bad place to be, because that's where you can hear the crucified Savior speak.

"Woman, behold your son," He declares, and "Son, behold your mother." With these words, He still directs pastors to preach His Word and His people to hear it. There, in His Word, He warns you of sin in His Law. He gives faith and strength with forgiveness in His Gospel. Add His Word to water, and His gift of Baptism is there. Add His Word to bread and wine, and His gift of Holy Communion is there. Therefore, He is there.

This is your comfort when suffering comes along, when you find yourself painfully aware that you live under the cross. For the patient awaiting test results or undergoing the course of chemotherapy, the time is trying and the devil tries to make the most of it; he would have you believe that God is stringing you along, breaking His promises. You know this to be different, for there are no divine promises in doubt here. For those who are sick, their own flesh tells them that what Scripture says is true: We are in fact sinful, and so we face sickness and eventual death. But behold the Son, who has already taken your sickness and death to the cross, died and risen again. He promises His presence and forgiveness now; He guarantees life forever.

For the parents with a child in the military and possibly in harm's way, a day doesn't go by without some anxious moments; the daily news preaches the law that this life is uncertain and this world is violent. But behold the Son-the Son of God. In the waters of Holy Baptism, He has already cleansed your children of their sin and has given them life and salvation. By His Word, He is present with His people even now-including those on the front lines of battle. While we do not know what chapters of conflict lie in between, we do know the end of the story: The Lord will not forsake His people, but will deliver us all to eternal life.

For adult children who find themselves caring for infirm parents, it is a distressing task to those who once took care of you slowly slipping away. The ravages of illness and age preach to us the Law that this world is passing away. Therefore, behold the Son. His promises endure and His faithfulness is sure; even if we forget our own names, the Lord still remembers us.

For those who suffer loss, anxiety and depression, there is little surprise there: This world is one of loss, anxiety and depression. I do not mean to make light of that, for such things can be paralyzing in their depth. But behold the Son, and know this for sure: None of the loss of this world negates the Savior's promise, for nothing can change the cross at Calvary.

For those haunted by past sins, behold the Son at the cross, for your sin dies there, too. The Son promises absolute absolution for all of your sins, and this is far more sure than troubling memories. To your Savior, you are His forgiven people-and so you are His bride, the Church. He commends you to the care of His Word at the cross, and He promises to raise you from the dead.

Any time can be a long time, especially when you don't want to be where you are. This will often be the case when you find yourself in suffering. But take heart and behold the Son; the Lord's suffering for the sins of the world had an end, as will yours. St. Paul writes, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us." (Ro. 8:18). That glory is yours in Christ, though for now you live under the cross. But because you are there, you hear Him say that you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen