"Once for All"
John 19:30 & Luke 23:46

Lent 5 - March 20, 2002

The Sixth Word and the Seventh Word

"It is finished!"

"Father, 'into Your hands I commit My spirit.'"

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Boise, Idaho

Pastor Tim Pauls

I. Once a Year, Every Year

It happened once a year, every year, on the tenth day of the seventh month. No one was to work at all; instead, they were called to afflict their souls. No one was to work, save one: The high priest had important duties that day. And because he was the only one at work, it was clear that the day was all about what the high priest was doing.

So the high priest would go about his work on the tenth day of the seventh month. He wasn't just anyone, but the one chosen by God to do this work. He didn't dress that day in the usual elaborate clothing; instead, he wore a simple linen robe in humility. He would select a bull and sacrifice it so that he might be purified: The bull's blood was shed so that the high priest's sins might be taken away. He would then select two goats and sacrifice one of them; the blood of this goat was shed for the sins of the people. Once the sacrifices were done, he would take the blood of the bull and the goat and dare to enter the Holy of Holies, venturing into the presence of God. He would present the blood of the bull and goat before the Lord, covering various items in blood. He was making atonement for the sins of the people, and the blood was offered to cover their sins before the Lord.

The high priest would then leave the Holy of Holies and return outside to the one goat who was left. He would place his hands on the goat of the head and confess over it all the sins of Israel; in doing so-by speaking!, he was placing all the sins of the people upon the head of the goat. Once the goat carried all the sins of the people, he was driven away to escape into the wilderness, never to be seen again. The scapegoat was taking all of their sins away.

It happened once a year, every year, on the tenth day of the seventh month. It was a gory sort of worship: throats were cut and blood was spilled, collected, poured out. It was not the sort of thing that was attractive or enjoyable; but it was necessary. These bloody sacrifices were a statement by God that sin was serious business, that there are fatal consequences for iniquity. But they were also a statement that there was a way that the people could be forgiven. The chosen high priest would make these sacrifices. One goat would carry the sins of the people away. The other goat would be slaughtered, and in effect his blood was used to cover up the sins of the people so that God would not count them anymore. Thus this Day of Atonement was called the "Day of Covering;" or in Hebrew, Yom Kippur.

But why would goat blood achieve such noble things? It was not the blood of the goat that did this, for: Not all the blood of beasts on Jewish altars slain Could give the guilty conscience rest or wash away the stain. (TLH 156:1)

No, it wasn't the blood of the goat that did this; rather that sacrifice pointed to the Sacrifice which was to come.

II. Once

It happened once. Not once a year, but once.

There is plenty of work going on in the city, because the Passover Sabbath is almost here, and then no one can work. People are bustling about all sorts of tasks, and some Roman soldiers have drawn grisly duty: They are overseeing the crucifixion of three men on a hill outside Jerusalem. But although everyone seems to be about their own work that day, this day is really only about one: The One on the middle cross, for He is the High Priest of us all.

He begins His day in a simple, humble linen robe, but even that is stripped from Him. He is now hanging on a cross, wounded and bleeding, suffering for the sins of the world. No matter how the artists depict it, this is a grisly, repelling scene-in no way attractive or inviting. It is far more upsetting to view than the Old Testament Day of Atonement.

But stop and look anyway, dear friends: This is your Day of Atonement. Rather, He is your Day of Atonement.

As He hangs on the cross, Jesus is your High Priest: He is the One who offers sacrifices on your behalf to God. He is the one who intervenes on your behalf before His Father in heaven, so that you might be forgiven for your sin.

Even as He is the High Priest on your Day of Atonement, He is also the goat who is sacrificed. Your sins are no longer counted against you because He sheds His blood there, and the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin (I John 1:7). By His death on the cross, He atones for your sin. His blood covers your sin; for His sake, God no longer counts your sin against you.

And even as He is the High Priest and the sacrificial goat on the cross, He is also the scapegoat. Our sins are placed upon Him by no less than His Father in heaven; our sins are upon Him because God says so. The scapegoat carried away the sins of the people into the wilderness, never to be seen again; Jesus carries our sin into the grave, never to be seen again. He will rise three days later; our sin will not.

He is the high priest, the sacrificial goat and the scapegoat. He is your Day of Atonement. On the cross, He suffers an eternity of hell for your sin; therefore, on the cross, He is an eternity worth of sacrifice for you. This is why we don't sacrifice animals in worship anymore, even though the Lord commanded that this be done once a year, every year, eternally, forever. On the cross, Jesus is the sacrifice for every year, eternally, forever.

This is why the book of Hebrews declares, "It is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins" (Heb. 10:4), and then of Christ proclaims, "For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified" (Heb. 10:14). He has atoned for all sin of all time. There is nothing left to be paid.

And that is why, on the cross, your Day of Atonement declares, "It is finished." He refers not just to His suffering for sin. He announces to the world that you are forgiven, that He has cleansed you and covered your sins with His blood.

Because the suffering is done and the price is paid, the Son who cried out "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" is no longer forsaken. His last words from the cross are "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit."

He speaks these words clearly, loudly, for all to hear. After the suffering and the blood loss, the agony and the admitted thirst, His voice remains loud and strong. This is not the normal way of dying; death robs us of our strength and abilities, so that at the last we can barely whisper, if we can speak at all. This is because we are no match for the power of death. But Christ is: He cries out in a loud voice because death has no power over Him. Death is not dragging Jesus to the tomb; no, Jesus is carrying death to its grave. He speaks strongly, for He dies only because He wills to die. He wills to die so that He can defeat death for you, and rise again on the third day.

"Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit;" then, He breathes His last. But though the disciples haven't seen the Resurrection as the sun sets on Good Friday and are near total despair, there is still hope: The Lord declares the work is done. It is finished.

III. For All

We have not seen the Resurrection, either; but we have heard of our Lord's death and rising, and we have heard His proclamation that "It is finished." This is of great comfort for us.

As we have studied the Seven Last Words of Christ during this Lenten season, we have seen how our Lord offers comfort in a variety of trying circumstances-in times of guilt, doubt and uncertainty; in times of suffering and illness; times of persecution, worry, anguish, strife and woe. All of these are consequences of sin, and all of these are reminders of the greatest consequence: The wages of sin is death.

So, as we hear the words of our Savior just before He breathes His last, it is appropriate that we speak of death-that dark, terrifying enemy which still lurks ahead for all of us. Should the Lord tarry, we each face the certainty of dying; sooner or later, the medical pronouncement will be made over us: "There's nothing more that we can do."

It is then that the devil tightens the screws on even the most godly of Christians, for it is his last chance to persuade us to abandon our Savior. He haunts with thoughts of self-righteousness: He tries to distract the people from the cross by whispering that they should trust in their own goodness, or else that they certainly haven't done enough to earn God's favor. He generates fear within the Christian, fear which Martin Luther said was the worst part of dying. The fear may manifest itself in the form of anger toward God, leaving the Christian either ashamed at his outburst or at odds with the Lord. The fear may work in other ways, too, leaving the Christian to believe that-if he truly has enough faith-he shouldn't be afraid; and thus, he cannot be truly saved as long as he is afraid.

At such times, we do well to remember the truth. The truth of the devil is that he is a liar. He's very good at it, to be sure; he makes you think that his lies are good and right and even originate in you. But he remains a liar, for God says so. The Lord Jesus Christ, on the other hand, always speaks to

you the truth. He does not mislead or spin or prevaricate; He speaks to you the truth so that you might have life. Therefore, when you are tempted by the devil, don't argue him with his false words, or even with your own. Instead, speak the words of your Savior.

Your Savior declares, "It is finished." You do not have to wonder what you must still do to be certain of eternal life; there is nothing left for the baptized people of God. The Lord has done it all for you: The work for your salvation is accomplished.

"It is finished." You do not have to wonder if the Lord has some residual anger for your sin, that He is taking out a little wrath on you before your life is ended. He has placed all of His wrath on His Son, and there is none left. It is finished.

And should you think that you must not be afraid of death in order to be a Christian, repeat the words again: "It is finished." The Lord has died for all of your sins and all of your fears. He has made you His in Baptism. If you are a fearful child of God, it does not matter in the end; you are still a child of God. That fear cannot hurt you, for Jesus declares, "It is finished." Fear can still frighten, but its power died at the cross.

No, Jesus is your High Priest and your Sacrifice, the One who offers Himself for your sin. His sacrifice is sufficient. There is nothing that can be added to it. Your salvation is sure, because the price is paid and it is finished.

Because it is finished, the Christian can also pray, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit." God is the One who has given you your body, soul and spirit in the first place, and has preserved them throughout your life. It is only right that He keep you-body, soul and spirit-through your death. When Jesus was at death's door, he committed Himself to His Father; because you are part of His body, He has already committed you to His care, too. You can be sure that the Father cares for you, because the plan of salvation is finished.

The devil will howl and chill our bones at times; but his howls about you and your Savior are all lies, and these lies lost their hold at the cross. The Lord's Word, however remains. As you live and as you die, you know that His blood has atoned for all of your sins. You know that He has finished salvation for you.

You know that He has committed you to His Father in heaven, for you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen