

Who Will Deliver Me From This Body of Death?!

Heavenly Father we ask that open our ears to your word, our hearts to your Spirit and our lives to your love. Amen.

I've heard that Martin Luther said all Christians should memorize the book of Romans. I don't know about you but Luther gives me way too much credit. It's not just the sheer volume of words but I find Paul's writings sometimes difficult to read. Paul tends to write run-on sentences that last for paragraphs and he adds parenthetical phrases that go so long that by the time you see the closing parentheses you forgot there was an opening parentheses. I find today's reading in Romans to be one of those more difficult passages. "I don't do what I want to do but I do what I don't want to do..." That reading always brings to my mind a novelty tee-shirt I once saw in a catalogue. This particular tee-shirt sported three quotes and named their respective authors. The first quote was "To be is to do" –Socrates. The second quotes was "To do is to be" –Jean Paul Sartre. The third quote was "Do be do be do" –Frank Sinatra. Thanks to my poor miserable sinful nature that quote comes to my mind whenever I read this passage of scripture, and, now, I'm sorry, will probably come to yours as well.

The other thing about scripture is that sometimes much of the writing tends to seem somewhat flat. The Bible is obviously not a novel written by some highly descriptive popular author. As an example, in the creation account of Genesis the formation of the heavenly bodies of our seemingly endless magnificent universe is boiled down to an unassuming "He also made the stars".

That's something about Paul's writings I like. Paul's epistles are the ones where you will find exclamation points. Paul is obviously passionate about that of which he writes. In today's Epistle reading he cries out "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" Now this isn't some flippant palm-to-the-forehead, oops, I'm-such-a-goof, did-I-do-that expression. No, this is a knees on the ground, face on the floor, tears streaming from the eyes cry of anguish! Paul knows his situation as a poor miserable sinner is completely hopeless and he faces nothing less than eternal damnation and separation from God left to his own devices! And here Paul doesn't write in a manner that meanders for paragraphs as he cuts right to the chase and immediately answers his own anguished cry with "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

A few months ago when Rev asked me to fill in for him I quickly agreed. What a great honor! However as this day approached I began to feel a certain panic set in as I realized I was going to have to prepare a sermon which I would then have to preach in front of the congregation of Concordia Lutheran Church. Then it came to me that it wasn't about me but about drawing on the abundant resource that is the Word of God. So I went to the concordance

in the back of my Bible and looked under the word “rescue”. Wow. There is so much material there that I could prepare at least a three hour sermon! Fortunately for you I don’t have that kind of stamina.

Paul’s anguished cry is an echo of cries for rescue throughout the Bible. Ps.31:2 “Turn your ear to me, come quickly to my rescue, be my rock of refuge, a strong fortress to save me.” Ps.69:14 “Rescue me from the mire, do not let me sink; deliver me from those who hate me, from the deep waters.” Ps.71:2 “Rescue me and deliver me in your righteousness; turn your ear to me and save me.” Ps.143:9 “Rescue me from my enemies, O Lord, for I hide myself in you.” They go on and on. And these are just the cries for rescue. If you start looking at God’s answers to those cries, such as Ps.91:14 “Because he loves me, says the Lord, I will rescue him; I will protect him for he acknowledges my name”, you’ve opened up a whole new library of material.

Let’s visit Calvary. There the Christ hung on a cross between what scripture calls two “robbers” or “thieves”. Scripture tells us that one of those criminals repented before he died. I’ve heard it said about this repentance that the Bible has one example of a death bed confession; one, so that none may despair, but only one, so that none may presume. It is interesting to note that the Gospels of Matthew and Mark both record that those “crucified with him also heaped insults upon him”. So this repentant thief was not repentant at the outset. Seeing as the three of them hung up there for hours, what brought about this criminal’s change of heart? Personally I imagine these men to be hardened criminals with no regard for the opinions of others. I imagine men with the attitude of “You can’t kill me because heaven doesn’t want me and hell is afraid I’ll take over!” I imagine men who are determined to meet their deaths as they lived, in a state of absolute defiance. So why the change?

Maybe it was the unforeseeable, unimaginable pain. Maybe it was the insects flying about him and swarming on his bloody wounds (which he had no way of slapping away). Maybe it was the increasing difficulty in breathing as his lungs filled with fluid. Maybe it was the realization that this time he had no way out of his predicament. He was really, truly and totally a goner, completely without hope. Maybe that’s when his heart broke and he let out the same anguished cry of Paul, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” Thankfully for him, as Paul’s answer immediately followed his question, the criminal’s answer hung a mere few feet away from him.

I mentioned how the recorded words of scripture can sometimes seem flat. The criminals statement “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” is so clean, so neat. In fact it is sung to a beautiful melody in the Roman Catholic Church during the Eucharist. But how did it really sound that day? After hours of hanging on a roughhewn cross, lungs filled with fluid, pain racking his body with every struggling breath, how did those words actually sound coming from the criminal’s mouth? I imagine it took tremendous effort and quite a long

time, perhaps even coughing up blood during the strain, raspy and barely audible. I imagine Jesus' response "Today you will be with me in paradise" was equally strained, labored and painful.

"Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of Death?" Paul's cry is the cry of the thief on the cross, the prisoner in the cell, the accountant in their cubicle, the farmer in their field, the soldier in the trench, the teacher in the classroom, the laborer on the assembly line, the worldly king on his worldly throne, the homeless man under the bridge, the person lying in their bed at night weeping hot tears of sorrow, regret and shame into their pillow.

It is our cry.

But of greater eternal importance than the question, I pray that we all know from Whom our deliverance comes because we can exclaim the answer in absolute faith, "But Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

Amen.