

Reading 1: Isaiah 64 - Reading 2: Mark 15: 33-41 - Text: Mark 15:37-39

On the second day of Creation, God separated the waters above and the waters beneath and the one He called heaven and the other He called earth. Heaven represented God in all His glory and His power. Earth was where man dwelt. While man was sinless, God was able to come down to earth to visit with man, to walk and talk with Him in the garden. When man was kicked out of the garden, He was forced out of the spot where he could have communion with God. Man lived under death, separated from God, His heart was filled with sin and wickedness. He gave his heart over to the lies of the Devil. God had grace upon man. God would overcome the division that man had put between Him and Himself, by overcoming the natural division He had put between the heavens and the earth.

God did this by the incarnation(道成肉身). He created something new that had never been seen before. A virgin conceived and bore a Son. This Son would spread the news of His kingdom, through the preaching of the gospel and through signs and miracles among the people of Israel. Through this Son, He would re-create the earth. God himself broke the barrier He had put between heaven and earth, by speaking Himself into flesh. We had been created in the image of God, we would be re-created into the image of the incarnate son, Jesus Christ.

Long before this, Isaiah, observing the sin of man, seeing that all our righteousness is as filthy rags (破烂的衣衫), pleaded with God that the heavens would be opened and the righteousness of God would come down. That He would clean and renew the land of Israel. The beginning of this fulfillment was already suggested in Mark 1: 9-11. When Jesus is baptized (受洗), the skies are parted and voice of God comes down from heaven to earth. "You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." God has started the process of reconciling (使...和好) man to himself. He has begun the kingdom of righteousness on earth through His incarnate Son. To truly bring the kingdom of righteousness, to truly be revealed as the Son of God, to be able to conquer the great accuser, so that no-one can say a word against the righteous who are in Christ, He, Jesus Christ, must die in our place. The cross must become the center of history. The focal point to which men must go, in order to partake in a new creation. In Christ, the old order of Israel dies, the old fallen creation in Adam dies, and Christ, the new Adam initiates a new and living way. In Christ the heavens will be opened again and the righteousness of God will be revealed to all men.

This event of the cross is a cosmic event. Christ, the Holy Warrior, defeats the prince of this world, Satan(撒旦). Christ pours out a deluge of blood for the healing of the nations. By His death, death itself is defeated. I bring you the word of the Lord under the theme: Christ's death tears the heavens...We will see.

1. His Life Torn
2. The Veil Torn
3. A Heart Torn

Our text begins, "And Jesus cried out with a loud voice, and breathed His last." The divine person, the God-man, Jesus Christ has just died on the Cross. It is apparent that Jesus has chosen this moment to die. Our interest should be piqued(被激发) that Jesus cried out with a loud voice: He has been six hours on the cross, he should not be able cry out so loudly anymore. His loud voice underscores the fact that He has chosen this moment for His death. Usually criminals would last two or three days, having been crucified, but Jesus ends it right now. Jesus says in John 10: 17 and 18, "Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father." He knows He must tear life and spirit from His body in order to conquer death. He must choose the path of weakness in order to conquer the Strong man, the devil. He must die so that we might die with Him.

The other gospels add to this one details concerning what Jesus may have said, with this loud cry. Luke gives us the words, "Father into Your hands I commit My spirit." Jesus is giving up His spirit. The important thing to realize from these words is that Jesus is in control of the situation. He is purposefully offering up His body as the perfect sacrifice(完美的献祭). John records Jesus' words. "It is finished." Jesus work is done. The cross is there now, the unbelievable testimony of a God who loved the world so much that He sent His only son, to die for those who believe in Him; A testimony that the kingdom is now here. The wrath of God has been poured out.

Immediately before the death of Jesus, Mark records the deep darkness that covered the earth for three hours. The darkness reveals something more of what is going on here. Darkness is the plague that happens before the death of a son in the plagues of Egypt. Darkness going further back is what covered the earth before God created light. The deep darkness of the ninth plague, the darkness that covers the cross for three hours are signs of the unmaking of the world. The world is unmade, so that it might be renewed. The world is unmade so that it is prepared for the light of salvation of Jesus Christ. The death of the Son of God, through whom the world was made, is accompanied by an un-making of the world, so that it might be renewed through Him. The cross is the centre of this renewal(更新).

Why is the world symbolically unmade? What is so unnatural about what is going on here? The scene is unnatural because this crucifixion is absolutely unjust(不公正). The only truly, fully righteous man that ever existed, the only man who has no sin, is this Man here on the cross, punished for sins He did not commit. So Jesus cries out the cry of the suffering righteous man of Ps. 22, "Eloi, Eloi, lama, sabachthani?" or "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me." This is the horror. We all deserve this death. Christ did not. But He did it in our place. No wonder the world darkens. All that is right and good in the natural and moral order of the world is turned on its head."

The men around Jesus, think that He is calling Elijah. Elijah was thought to protect the righteous sufferer. When he was to be taken to the king in 2 Kings 1 by fifty men, He is proven righteous by God, when He calls fire onto the heads of various companies who try to take Him. Perhaps the men who mock Jesus think the Jesus is calling on Elijah to call on God to pour fire on their heads. What they don't understand is that Jesus is the new Elijah. He is the one called to prepare the way for the kingdom of God. And the fire of heaven will not fall on their heads yet, but it must, this time, fall upon the righteous sufferer Himself. He must suffer so that if any of these mockers about the cross confess their sins and confess their trust in Him, they will avoid this wrath, this cross, which they all deserve.

Jesus Christ bore the punishment for sin. He, the righteous sufferer reverses the story of Elijah calling down fire upon the companies of the King of Israel. We come to abuse Him and instead of calling out a righteous fire on us, he takes a righteous fire and calls it upon Himself. Our baptism is a sign and seal of our death and resurrection with Jesus. (Romans 6) We are unmade and re-made in Him. Heaven is torn in the tearing of life from Jesus Christ. The righteousness of God has come down to earth.

Now there was a way to be righteous before God, in the Old Testament. This was a way that looked forward to the coming of Jesus, always by faith. This was the way of the temple, the sacrifices, and the law. The death of Jesus is the end of that way for ever. The Kingdom of God has come, symbolized in the Person of Jesus Christ. So when Jesus dies, when His life is torn from His body by His own choice, at that very moment the veil of the temple is torn in two from top to bottom.

The veil torn

Mark continues in His account; "Then the veil of the temple was torn from top to bottom." The veil was a border that God had created between the Holy of Holies(至圣所) and the Holy Place. In the Holy of Holies was the Ark(约柜). This was the sanctuary(圣地), where only one Man went and only once a year. This was the High Priest. He symbolized or represented the rest of the nation of Israel. The Holy Place was where the people of Israel were allowed. The Holy of Holies was a symbol of the sanctuary of heaven. This was ripped open from top to bottom. From top to bottom, meaning that God did it. God opened up heaven to men. God would dwell freely with men once more, with all those who believed in Him, with all those who were made righteous by the blood of His Son. Because His Son had become incarnate, because His Son had worn weak human flesh, because He had been offered up as a sacrifice, God would dwell with men again in the temple of His Son.

Heaven is torn open. The way to the garden of Adam and Eve is open again. God's sanctuary is free for all men to see. The Son through His suffering will lead the way to this reconciliation(和好,和解)

The Son was to be the High Priest now; the new representative of Israel. He had come before the Holy of Holies and had been found worthy. His death is the end of all the ceremonies(礼仪) of Israel. Now the people of God do not need the temple anymore, for all the divisions, the endless walls, the endless sacrifices have been ended through the person of Christ.

Paul offers a quick comparison between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant in Hebrews 10: 11-13 "And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins." The priest of the Old Testament could never offer a sacrifice that took away sins. These were only picture of what was to come. "But this man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God, from that time waiting till His enemies are made His footstool." This new way is far better than the old. It is far quicker and far more effective. Paul adds in verse 14 and 15, "For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified(被成圣). But the Holy Spirit also witnesses to us; for after He had said before, This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them, then He adds, Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more. Now where there is remission(宽恕,赦免) of these there is no longer an offering for sin."

We in the new covenant depend on one sacrifice for the forgiveness of all our sins; we don't need to do anything in order to contribute to this salvation. Of course neither did the men of the Old Testament. Their sacrifices did not contribute to their salvation, but confirmed the promise of a sacrifice to come.

Because of our new High priest according to Hebrews 10, we may have "boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is His flesh." The old veil has been torn away; Jesus is the new and living way. His flesh is the new veil. We who are in Him, we who have died with Him should have no fear in coming before the throne of God. When Christ's life is torn from Him, the veil that separated us from God is torn as well. For Christ's flesh is the veil.

When the veil is torn the temple is desecrated. What is common comes in touch with the Holy. God came in contact with flesh. Flesh that died. There is no longer any separation between the common and the Holy for those who are in Christ Jesus. We who are in Christ, are the Holy ones now by the working of the Spirit.

When the veil is torn the temple is desecrated. What is unclean is now Holy. When Peter is told to eat unclean animals, God tells Him, "What God has cleansed you must not call common." Christ is the new temple, to which men come for righteousness. He took all uncleanness on Himself.

When the veil is torn the temple is desecrated. In Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile. You may come boldly. The laws of cleanliness, in order to come before God, do not apply anymore. You don't need a priest, you don't need a high priest, because you have Jesus Christ. You may enter His throne room freely. Mark underscores this point by putting into the words of an unclean Gentile the words which no other human pronounces in His gospel. This brings us to our 3rd point, heart torn.

Heart Torn.

This unclean Gentile, a centurion(外邦人), standing opposite to the cross, hearing the loud voice, seeing the death of Christ, cries out, "Truly this Man was the Son of God." Through His death, through the opening up of the Holy of Holies, of Heaven, this centurions' Heart is torn.

This centurion has had quite a day. He has had a very special victim to crucify. A victim to crucify is in itself is not unusual, but this one calls Himself the king of the Jews and the Jews themselves seem to have a particular hatred for this man. Then we have three hours of darkness, which would have brought great fear into the highly superstitious(迷信的) Roman soldiers. Then He sees this criminal who has already been six hours upon the cross, cry out with a loud voice and immediately die. He is thoroughly shaken. The sight of Christ's death is enough for Him, He knows something very important is going on here, so He tells us, "This is the Son of God."

The Roman Centurion is the only human in the book of Mark to recognize this fact. God the Father has named Him at his Baptism and at the transfiguration in Mark 8. Demons have named him, but they have been quieted by Jesus Christ. Now other people have understood who Christ is, before Christ's death on the Cross. (We know this from the other gospels) But Mark wants to show something very important by saving the revelation for this moment. He wants to show us the central importance of the Cross to the revelation of who Christ is. All Christ's life is a preparation for this moment. The crucified Christ is the place to which all Christians must go for repentance(悔改), all must be washed by this fountain of blood. This is where God calls all men, to be washed and renewed by the blood of His Son.

The cross further is the full revelation of who Jesus is. The signs and the portents that surround Jesus' death are all pointing to who He is. It is only at the cross where we get the full understanding of Jesus. Without it He is just a good man. Yes He conquers devils, but through His death He decisively conquers the devil. Yes He forgives sins, but only in the cross does He show how these are forgiven, because He has taken the punishment for them. Yes He resurrects, but only on the cross, does He in His own death provide a new and living way for all men to be resurrected with Him.

The Roman Centurion sees that this man is more than he appears and he confesses that fact. The Roman Centurion was in charge of putting this man on the cross. He commanded the soldiers to put the nails into this man and He recognizes that He has commanded the death of a righteous man. He has put to death the Son of God.

It is also fitting that Mark puts this confession(认信) in the mouth of a Roman Centurion. The first one to recognize Jesus in His moment of weakness, in His death is this soldier. Jesus has been preparing Israel for His death. He has been casting out demons, raising the dead, healing the sick, declaring the forgiveness of sins, in order to show Israel who He is, to show the people of God that He is the Son of God. This course of events has already been foreshadowed in Mark. In Mark 5, Jesus goes across to the land of the Gentiles. In the land of Gadara, Jesus heals a man, casts out a demon, and works in a man's heart, the former demoniac so that He speaks the word of Christ among the people of Gadara. He conquers a legion of demons so that a Gentile might confess Him. Here on the Cross, Jesus breaks the devil's hold on the earth and tears open this centurion's heart so that He confesses this dead, condemned criminal before Him as the Son of God.

This further would have been an encouragement to the Roman Christians to whom Mark is writing. When the Son of God breaks open the heavens, when God rends the heavens and lets His righteousness shine, the hearts of hardened Romans centurions. The oppressive Roman soldier must bow before the cross of Christ. The oppressive Roman soldier can be saved by the grace of Christ. The symbol of Jewish oppression, the Roman soldier, is one of the first to recognize the Son of God. This soldier is an assurance to us. Any man may follow his example. All are welcome before the cross. Therefore, repent and believe, if you have not done so, be baptized into Jesus. You may be the worst sinner. You may have led a life of lust and anger, but if God can put confession in the mouth of a brutal Roman Soldier, he can put it in your mouth as well. Trust in Jesus.

Remember this congregation of the Lord, when we present the Cross of Christ before the world. When we present Christ crucified before the world, the hearts of the worst men are torn. They are smitten by the death of Christ. This is the power of Grace.

Remember that you were with this centurion, congregation of the Lord, your sin nailed this man on the cross, as surely as this centurion commanded his soldiers to put up our Lord on the cross, but God tore the hearts of all who believe on Him.

Remember that you may have boldness in coming before this High Priest. Paul encourages us in Hebrews 10: 21-25, "And having a High Priest over the house of God, lest us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful."

Congregation, your sins are forgiven in Christ. You are freed in Christ. You are no longer subject to the old sacrifices of the Old Covenant. You are no longer separated from God by the veil of the temple. Congregation you have brothers and sisters in all those who come in faith to Christ, all the unclean and the common, who accept the free offer of grace in Christ. By the death of Christ, the Old Covenant has died and the Old self has died. We now live in Christ. He has broken through the heavens and brought us His righteousness. We are able to live in that righteousness, by faith. We now look forward to the day where, when the people of God are fully gathered and the time is ended, the heavens will open once more and heaven will come down to earth. In Revelation 21, John tells us, Then I John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God."