



7 + 1
WORDS



FROM THE
Heart
OF
GOD

HOLY WEEK 2023

A gift to you from Martin Luther College





HOLY WEEK 2023

7 + 1 WORDS FROM THE *Heart* OF GOD.

In these devotions, we'll ponder Christ's seven words from the cross—plus an additional Easter word. As Jesus suffers, what are his thoughts bent toward? What is he most concerned about? What is he personally experiencing? His own words give us a glimpse into the heart of the omnipotent God himself, who somehow feels sorrow and suffering as he defeats sorrow and suffering.

Some of Jesus' words are somber. Some are sublime. Others signify victory. And all of them matter.



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PALM SUNDAY

A SERVANT'S

Heart

*Jesus said, "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."
And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.*

LUKE 23:34

When we would have frozen with fear, Harold Lowe chose to serve. April 15, 1912. Five hundred feet from the sinking *Titanic*, Lowe reached a position of safety. But he didn't stay there. Though it was a waking nightmare, though dead bodies filled the sea, he returned to the ship. Alone among the officers, Lowe went back to rescue survivors. He remained dedicated to his superiors and to those in his care.

Let's revisit an earlier evening with far steeper stakes. What does our Savior reveal with his first words from the cross? An unparalleled servant's heart. Christ remains devoted to his almighty God and to the sinners in his care.

First, Jesus demonstrates service to his Father. At his conception and his birth at Bethlehem, Christ embraced an assignment he alone could complete. He chose submission. His compliance would save the Creator's other children. Now, the time for the last and most difficult part of this commitment had arrived. What do we hear in Calvary's first words from the heart of God? The holy Son's absolute obedience to his Father's will.

Even facing his darkest hours, Christ remains certain. Even though his Father would forsake him, Jesus

endures abandonment—suffers death—in our place. He earns our return to the Father's family.

Second, Jesus demonstrates service to all sinners. He is witnessing history's ugliest image of humanity as these vile men nail him to a cross. As he prays about it to the omnipotent Creator, what does he request? Deliverance? Vengeance? No. Beaten and bloody, he disregards his own anguish. Instead, in his audience with his Father, he pleads that his crucifiers receive pardon. In the face of untold and unjust agony, his thoughts center on a cure for *our* affliction. Sin.

We stand among those murderers. Bloodied hands. Filthy hearts. Each day, we are complicit in these crimes. What does Jesus request? That God punish us? That God ignore sins that warrant punishment? No. Christ instead prays for forgiveness, a forgiveness that preserves both justice and righteousness. Service at an infinite cost. Only the Son of God's holy life and innocent death could cancel our debt.

Harold Lowe's empty lifeboat preserved four dying people. On our path toward Easter, may God keep us fixed on the empty tomb of our Savior, which offers miraculous rescue to unnumbered helpless sinners. His service alone wins our everlasting safety in heaven.

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Prayer:

Dear Lord, thank you for making our undeserved forgiveness the purpose of your earthly life. Provide opportunities for us, in gratitude, to echo your selfless love. Amen.

Professor Paul Grubbs serves Martin Luther College as a professor of English.



MONDAY

A KING'S

Heart

Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

LUKE 23:43

A king certainly has a lot on his mind. But what does he have on his heart?

A king, especially an absolute king, has to make the hard decisions. So what is true? What is actually right? What is going to happen? When? Where? To whom?

A great moment in the history of kings, according to Shakespeare's histories, was the night before the battle of Agincourt. The future teetered on a cliff against horrible odds. King Henry V, with so much on his mind and heart, went out from his royal tent and walked veiled among the troops.

Henry mingled with the fires and fears of the people. It was not deadly for Henry as it was for Jesus, but that earthly king understood: "Upon the king!—let us our lives, our souls, / Our debts . . . and / Our sins lay on the king!" (*Henry V* 4:1)

So true for the Absolute Monarch hanging on that cross outside Jerusalem! So much—everything!—is on him. He has incredible resources to allocate: all wealth and power to take and redistribute, threats and dangers to assess, intelligence to process from the deepest part of every heart, legions of angels to move into formation. In his kingdom every life is his to give or to take.

So much on the King's mind, but what is on his heart? That's what one of Calvary's criminals wanted to know. What will you do with a person the authorities want, with good reason, to put away or get rid of forever? Will you remember me? When? Where? And what will you remember?

What made the criminal so bold? He had seen something of the King's heart, as Jesus was nailed and lifted on the cross. So now what? When? Where?

"Truly I tell you"—only an absolute king could say such a thing.

"Today"—Only a king could command such a thing.

"You will be with me"—Only this King would do such a thing.

"In paradise"—Ah, will all that is wrong and violent really be gone? Not if, not when, but now!

Jesus on the cross told the criminal and us exactly what was on the King's heart and within his power.

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Prayer:

Dear crucified King, help us to see your heart, marvel at your power, and hold close the paradise you gave us on Calvary. Amen.

Rev. Brian Dose serves Martin Luther College as a professor of English.



TUESDAY

AN EARTHLY SON'S



When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, "Woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

JOHN 19:26-27

Thirty-three years before this day, an elderly prophet held this same Jesus in his arms and spoke Spirit-given words to his mother, *"And a sword will pierce your own soul, too."*

If Mary ever wondered what those words meant, certainly her questions stopped as she watched her boy, split-lipped, puffy-eyed, blood-masked, and dying on a cross. Right in front of her eyes, they tossed dice at Jesus' feet, thrust a sponge in his face, and plunged a spear into his side.

Could there be any worse pain for a mother than watching her son give up his life? Could there be any worse knowledge than that his death was the price paid for *her* sins?

For six hours, Jesus hung on the cross. For six hours, he endured the mocking of the soldiers, the pain of his wounds, and the exhaustion of his dying body.

But he didn't simply hang there as God-for-this-world, as the Christ, the King of the Jews, or the leader of the

disciples. He hung there as a son, and he hung there as a friend.

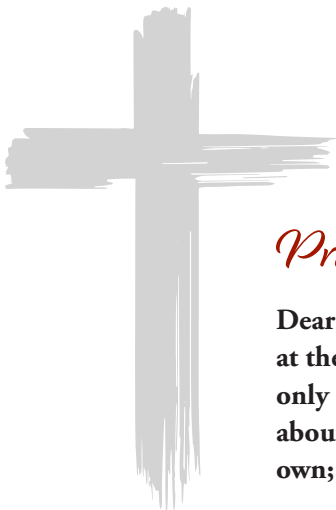
As great as Mary's love for her son Jesus was, Jesus' love for her was even greater. He was her perfect, loving, and obedient son until the end.

Isn't it astounding? As Jesus was suffering hell on the cross, being crushed for the sins of the entire human race throughout the history of the world, his thought was for the individual: *"Who will care for my mother now?"*

Jesus cares for each one, one at a time. Even in his greatest pain, Jesus was filled with love for his mother, filled with love for his disciple, filled with love also for you.

Can you see how much he loves you?

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Prayer:

Dear Lord Jesus, I'm amazed at the love you showed this world, even at the cross. I'm amazed that your thoughts were never for yourself but only for others. Forgive me for the times I think you have forgotten about me in my pain. Help me believe that your love now counts as my own; help me to love others with that same love. Amen.

Rev. David Scharf serves Martin Luther College as a professor of theology.



WEDNESDAY

A FORSAKEN

Heart

About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”).

MATTHEW 27:46

I jumped offside once in junior high football. It was a “double go,” and I jumped on the first “go.” I gave the other team a first down. Another player came running in and said, “Thomford, you’re out!” I ran to the sidelines and stood by the coach. He did not yell at me. He did not speak to me. He didn’t even look at me. I knew he was angry at my foolish mistake. But he just ignored me. That was tough. But I deserved it.

Isn’t this what we deserve from our heavenly Father? To have him refuse to look at us—forever. We have sinned against our Father by often grumbling about the troubles he allows in our lives. What should we hear God say to us? “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41 NIV). Not only will hell be a place of physical torment. Far worse will be the mental and spiritual anguish that our Father has rejected us forever—that the Father will refuse to look at us—forever!

Yet on the cross, Jesus cried out, “*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*” (which means “My God, my God,

why have you forsaken me?”). On the cross Jesus felt a pain far worse than his physical sufferings. He felt his own heavenly Father reject him. He felt his own Father refuse to look at him. On the cross Jesus suffered the torments of hell itself.

Why?

Isaiah says, “The LORD has charged all our guilt to him” (Isaiah 53:6 EHV).

In his heart Jesus felt the spiritual and mental anguish of hell itself—in our place and for our sin—so that we never will! What Jesus truly suffered that day none of us can ever truly fathom. From his heart he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

But because of Jesus’ forsaken heart, your Heavenly Father will never refuse to look at you! Your Father has forgiven your sin, and now he will love you and smile at you forever—in this life and in the life to come!

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Prayer:

Dear Jesus, when I feel that your Father has forsaken me, when I despair of his love, help me remember that he will never forsake me because you took my place upon the cross and suffered hell for me! Amen.

Rev. Joel Thomford serves Martin Luther College as an admissions counselor.



MAUNDY THURSDAY

A MESSIAH'S

Heart

Later, knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I am thirsty."

JOHN 19:28

We should not pass over those words in the middle, "and so that Scripture would be fulfilled," too quickly. They are not an incidental aside: they are at the heart of Jesus' life and ministry, and they reveal the heart of our Messiah to us.

Psalm 69 is a great messianic psalm, quoted more often in the New Testament than any other psalm except Psalm 22, another great messianic psalm. As John is inspired to write his gospel, he sees Psalm 69:21 being fulfilled here: "They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst." So do we.

These are the last moments of Christ's life, just before his cry of victory, just before he gave up his spirit. He announces his thirst and accepts the drink that he had refused earlier. After six hours of suffering on the cross—with dehydration from loss of blood, exposure to the elements, and gasping for breath—he wets his parched throat enough so that his last words could ring across the hilltop.

Three times in this chapter, John reports that something happened to fulfill a prophecy. The four

gospels make that explicit connection between prophecy in the Old Testament and fulfillment by Christ about 30 times. All told, Bible scholars estimate that Jesus fulfilled at least 300 prophecies, while some put the number of Old Testament passages that somehow point to or describe the coming Messiah in the 400s or even the 500s.

Regardless of the exact number, the biblical record clearly demonstrates that the crucifixion of Christ fulfilled numerous promises repeatedly made by God over thousands of years. God's plan was reaching its completion: it was "on that cross as Jesus died" that "the wrath of God was satisfied." The physical torment our Savior experienced was staggering; the crushing spiritual aloneness, as the Father forsook the Son, is incomprehensible. The wrath of the Father had been poured out in full measure on his Son so that by our Spirit-worked faith in his life, death, and resurrection our sins are forgiven and our relationship with God restored. The divine work of atonement mapped out in Scripture was fulfilled.

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Prayer:

Lord Jesus, in faith we stand at the foot of your cross and contemplate the work that you finished for us. All of the promises God has made are "Yes" in you, so through you we speak our "Amen" to the glory of God. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Lawrence Olson serves Martin Luther College as a professor of theology and director of both the Staff Ministry Program and the Congregational Assistant Program.



GOOD FRIDAY

A VICTORIOUS

Heart

*When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished."
With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.*

JOHN 19:30

"*Finished*"—the sound trailed from Jesus' lips as he gasped for breath on the cross. There was purpose behind that word. Earlier in his ministry—according to John's gospel account—when Jesus said that he had "food to eat that you know nothing about," he explained to his confused disciples, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and *to finish his work.*" A short while later, Jesus affirmed that "the very work that the Father has *given me to finish*, and which I am doing, testifies that the Father has sent me." In both the original text and in our English translation, the same verb is used in each of these statements: "*finish.*" The work of Jesus was to finish his Father's will.

That's exactly what Jesus did. Helping, healing, pardoning, proclaiming. From start to finish, every day of Jesus' life was lived in pure and perfect love—in submission to the Father's will. Every minute of every day had a purpose—to redeem humanity from the curse of sin. It was not an easy life. The Son of Man had no place to lay his head, and opposition swirled around him constantly. But Jesus kept at it.

The very word "finish" is language that pictures the end of a difficult race. When a distance runner

competes, the finish line signals the end of strenuous exertion. The long, hard task is over. But for the winner, the finish line also signals a beginning—the elation of a victory celebration. The finish brings both an end and a beginning. That is the perspective that we are invited to take with us from the scene of Christ's crucifixion. "It is finished!"—the completion of Christ's life of obedience *and* the culmination of Christ's overwhelming victory over sin and Satan.

There is freedom in that announcement. Christ's victory will stand to eternity. Nothing in all the world can ever nullify the perfect race run by our Savior. In the midst of this tragic scene, we're filled with an overwhelming sense of relief. It's over! God is satisfied. Jesus surrendered his life so that we might never die. When he said, "It is finished," he entered into his victory celebration. While human eyes saw weakness on the cross, Christ was proving his strength to endure to the very end. Yes, Jesus' breathless body was buried, but, made alive, Jesus demonstrated his triumph over Satan in hell. We can look at the cross with eyes focused beyond the tomb to the victory of Easter morning. Amen.

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Prayer:

**What language shall I borrow to thank you, dearest Friend,
For this, your dying sorrow, your pity without end?
Oh, make me yours forever, and keep me strong and true;
Lord, let me never, never outlive my love for you. Amen.**
(CW 428:3)

Rev. Paul Koelpin serves Martin Luther College as a professor of theology and history.



SATURDAY

A HEAVENLY SON'S

Heart

*Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."
When he had said this, he breathed his last.*

LUKE 23:46

For some of us, if we are so blessed, "father" is among the warmest of words. For others, "father" names an emptiness, a familiar ache for someone who combines soul-calming strength with tenderest affection, take-to-the-grave wisdom with predictable grace. Someone who is completely yours.

The way Jesus spoke of *his* Father landed on most Jewish ears as blasphemy, an essential robbing from God what was his alone. It was the intimate, even casual way he spoke of and to the Lord of the Universe—it was "Abba this" and "Abba that." In the Hebrew manner of speaking, "son of glory" means "glory through and through." Just so, there is no "less than" in being the Son of God. He is God through and through.

Robe-tearing stuff!

So we come to one final scandal, this one shouted to the sky in the hearing of an astonished crowd.

"Coming, Abba!"

With that, Jesus poured his spirit out like holy wine onto the altar of his God, an act of pure devotion—so like his life—and a sublime death that counts as yours.

Then the homecoming. The hero's welcome. Angel applause.

No blasphemy here. No stealing from heaven. Holy mystery—God gives himself to God!

The "Seventh Word" recalls a Jewish bedtime prayer. As you fall back nightly into the helplessness of sleep you may practice just this sort of falling into God. Our Lord has opened up a new way to die . . . and a whole new way to live.

Jesus was quoting David in Psalm 31 about a time of deep struggle. Do the same. Remember the Father's hands when things get dark. Learn from Luther to *perpetually* commend every last thing that matters—everything you care about, everyone you love, even your very soul—into the hands of God. He learned that from Jesus.

By Word and Spirit, smiling or sighing, your way of life can be "Abba this" and "Abba that."

Jesus really lives as surely as he really died for us all. He said the loveliest thing to Mary on that stunning Sunday morning. He told her in John 20 that he would soon ascend to "my God and yours."

And this, Beloved, to fill every empty place inside.

". . . to my Father *and yours*."

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Prayer:

Jesus, teach me to live in serene confidence because you lived and died for me. Let me die with an eager, cheerful word; "Coming, Abba!" Amen.

Rev. Dr. Mark Paustian serves Martin Luther College as a professor of English and Hebrew.



EASTER SUNDAY

A MISSIONARY'S

Heart

"Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."

JOHN 20:21

As Jesus speaks words of peace and commissioning, remember the setting. His disciples were cowering behind locked doors. They had just heard from a resurrection eyewitness, yet doubts still echoed. But suddenly there was Jesus: speaking peace to their doubting hearts and sending them to a world where doubt and fear still ruled many hearts.

As Jesus comforts and commissions his struggling disciples on Easter, there are echoes of a conversation in which the Father spoke comfort and commissioning to Jesus. In one of the servant songs of Isaiah, Jesus tells his Father how his often-rejected ministry vexed his missionary heart. "I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing at all" (Isaiah 49:4).

And the Father's answer? "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob. . . . I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6).

In those two statements, you hear the Son's longing missionary heart answered by the Father's comforting missionary heart. The Father assures his Son that the

salvation won by his ministry would reach the ends of the earth.

So the Father comforted and commissioned his Son. So Jesus comforts and commissions his doubting disciples. So, on this Easter Day, Jesus comforts and commissions us, his often doubting and fearful 21st-century disciples. In fact, in a very special way, we are proof of what the Father promised his Son. The truth of Easter morning has made its way across thousands of miles and two thousand years from a locked room in Jerusalem to our hearts.

And God's missionary heart is so large it still longs for more. That's why Jesus doesn't only speak "Peace" to us this Easter. He also speaks words of commissioning.

As you celebrate your Easter peace, look around you. Many are still hiding in fear and doubt. God's missionary heart longs to give you his same heart. He longs to lead us to say to other troubled hearts what Jesus says each day to us: "Peace be with you!"

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Prayer:

Thank you, Lord Jesus, that your Easter message to us is "Peace." Continue to quiet our doubts so that the certainty of your Easter peace so fills our hearts that we cannot help but speak. May your Easter peace create within us a missionary's heart just like yours. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Richard Gurgel serves Martin Luther College as president.

