

## SEVEN INSIGHTS WORTH LIVING FOR

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Today begins the time known in the Christian calendar as Holy Week — the seven days from Palm Sunday, which is today, to Easter, which comes next Sunday. During this week, Christians around the world commemorate the final days in the life of Jesus of Nazareth: his so-called triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the Last Supper with his disciples on Thursday evening, his trial and crucifixion by Roman soldiers on Friday, his burial on Saturday, and his resurrection on Easter Sunday.

In the chronicle of Jesus' life as recorded in the Christian New Testament, Palm Sunday represents the high water mark of his ministry. An itinerant prophet from a backwater town in the Galilee, Jesus made his entrance into Jerusalem to great popular acclaim. By then, the Jews had endured a brutal occupation by the Romans for more than 150 years. The Jews longed for a political leader who could help them throw off Roman rule, and they hoped against hope that Jesus would lead the way.

Instead, five days later, Jesus was executed by the Romans. This was not an uncommon outcome. Whenever the Jews had revolted, the Romans had punished them, usually by crucifixion. During the crackdown around the time Jesus was born, for example, the Romans crucified about 2,000 Jews.

When Jesus was crucified, he likely hung on the cross for a considerable time. The tradition has been handed down that he uttered seven final pronouncements during this time of extreme suffering. Over time, these sayings were collected as the so-called seven last words.

In the late 1990's, the Brentano String Quartet commissioned the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Mark Strand to write a "Poem After the Seven Last Words" to accompany their performance of Haydn's string quartet opus 51, titled "The Seven Last Words of Christ." Strand's poem, in seven parts, represents a contemporary reflection on the seven last sayings.

Our service today asks what wisdom these seven enigmatic utterances reveal to us. Jesus didn't end up dying for these seven insights alone, but he did die for the way of life they represent. For two thousand years, people have struggled to know what they mean. Today, my hope is that we can glean insights worth living for in our time.

**THE FIRST INSIGHT:** The story never ends.

The first saying of Jesus from the cross was this: "Forgive them, for they know not what they do." This saying represents one of the greatest understatements in human

history. Forgive them, Jesus said, speaking of the soldiers, because they don't know what they are doing. They think they are putting an end to something, and they are, but something else is happening as well. About that, they have no idea. This story won't end here; it will continue. And indeed, the story of Jesus has continued. Two thousand years later, one-third of humanity — 2.2 billion people — identify themselves as followers of the Christ. And many of the rest of us recognize him as a prophet worth contemplating. The poet writes:

*The story of the end, of the last word  
of the end, when told, is a story that never ends.  
We tell it and retell it – one word, then another  
until it seems that no last word is possible,  
that none would be bearable. Thus, when the hero  
of the story says to himself, as to someone far away,  
“Forgive them, for they know not what they do,”  
we may feel that he is pleading for us, that we are  
the secret life of the story and, as long as his plea  
is not answered, we shall be spared. So the story  
continues. So we continue. And the end, once more,  
becomes the next, and the next after that.*

Think about the worst day of your life. Think about the time you got the worst news ever from your doctor, or your boss, or your spouse, or your child. Think about the time you failed most miserably, or betrayed someone most painfully, or succumbed to temptation most destructively. And then think about what came next. What seemed like the end – given that you didn't die – wasn't the end after all. And even death isn't the end. The story of your life and your influence will continue always. The first insight is that, in the end, the story never ends.

THE SECOND INSIGHT: We find ourselves in the dark.

The second saying of Jesus from the cross was this: “You shall be with me in paradise.” He suggests that the path to paradise — the spiritual symbol of what we most deeply want — may require us to endure periods of darkness. Jesus became a source of hope not by denying the suffering of his people and the brutality of the Romans, but by taking them in — into his heart and even into his body. He was, the scriptures say, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. The poet writes:

*There is an island in the dark, a dreamt-of place  
where the muttering wind shifts over the white lawns  
and ruffles the leaves of trees, the high trees*

*that are streaked with gold and line the walkways there;  
and those already arrived are happy to be silken  
remains of something they were but cannot recall;  
they move to the sound of stars, which is also imagined,  
but who cares about that; the polished columns they see  
may be no more than shafts of sunlight, but for those  
who live on and on in the radiance of their remains  
this is of little importance. There is an island  
in the dark and you will be there, I promise you, you  
shall be with me in paradise, in the single season of being,  
in the place of forever, you shall find yourself. And there  
the leaves will turn and never fall, there the wind  
will sing and be your voice as if for the first time.*

No matter what we most deeply want, we too may find ourselves in the dark — the darkness of ignorance, or doubt, or failure, or even of depression. The mystical tradition calls these periods “the dark night of the soul.” Sometimes, if we are fortunate, these times of soul-searching will lead to self-discovery. We find ourselves. We learn to admit our shortcomings, accept our brokenness, and confess our sins. At other times, especially with depression, we may find that we need help just to endure the darkness. In either case, the path to wherever we want to go begins where we are. The second insight is that we may find ourselves — and even perhaps discover ourselves — in the dark.

THE THIRD INSIGHT: We are bound to each other.

The third saying of Jesus from the cross was this: “Woman, look at your son. Son, look at your mother.” At first glance, this appears to be an effort by a dying man to make provisions for his mother’s well-being after he is gone. Jesus said to his mother, apparently while directing her attention to John, his close friend and favorite follower, “Behold your son.” And then he said to John, “Behold your mother.” This gesture bears witness to the compassion Jesus consistently showed for others. The poet writes:

*Someday someone will write a story telling,  
among other things, of a parting between mother  
and son, of how she wandered off, of how he vanished  
in air. But before that happens, it will describe  
how their faces shone with a feeble light and how  
the son was moved to say, “Woman, look at your son,”  
then to a friend nearby, “Son, look at your mother.”  
At which point the writer will put down his pen*

*and imagine that while those words were spoken  
something else happened, something unusual like  
a purpose revealed, a secret exchanged, a truth  
to which they, the mother and son, would be bound  
but what it was no one would know. Not even the writer.*

Especially when you encounter dark periods in your life, which all of us inevitably do, don't try to go it alone. Reach out to others for help — for friendship, for comfort, for guidance, for encouragement. Lean on them, and they, in their times of struggle, will lean on you. We are constituted by our relationships. Do your part to keep them strong. Because we share a common destiny, we walk together through life. The third insight is that we are bound to each other in ways beyond knowing.

THE FOURTH INSIGHT: Deepest darkness can't hide deepest longings.

The fourth saying of Jesus from the cross was this: "Father, Father, why have you forsaken me?" In the earliest gospel account of Jesus' crucifixion, the writer says that Jesus was crucified at 9 AM. From noon to 3 PM, while Jesus was still alive, the writer says, "a great darkness fell over all the land." Against this backdrop, the fourth saying of Jesus from the cross — the plaintive cry, "Why have you forsaken me?" — echoes in the darkness. Jesus feels utterly alone and completely forsaken, and he cries out in protest, demanding to know why. The poet writes:

*These are the days of spring when the sky is filled  
with the odor of lilac, when darkness becomes desire,  
and there is nothing that does not wish to be born;  
days when the fate of the present is a breezy fullness,  
when the world's great gift for fiction gilds even  
the dirt we walk on, and we feel we could live forever  
while knowing of course we can't. Such is our plight.  
The masters of weather and everything else, if they want,  
can bring forth a dark of a different kind, one hidden  
by darkness so deep it cannot be seen. No one escapes.  
Not even the one who believed he was chosen to do so,  
for when the dark came down he cried out, "Father, Father,  
why have you forsaken me?" To which no answer came.*

When bad things happen, you and I should also take life to task — press it hard, insisting on answers. We should also cry out, "Why? Why?" But here's the problem: the answer may not come. Sometimes things happen that don't make sense. Sometimes bad things happen to good people. Sometimes evildoers triumph. Whether or not you find

an answer, you will know what you cried out for – what you most deeply want and need. The fourth insight is that even the deepest darkness can't hide our deepest longings.

THE FIFTH INSIGHT: Nothing is more real than what's absent.

The fifth saying of Jesus from the cross was this: "I thirst." No one knows how long Jesus had been hanging on the cross when he said, "I thirst." But he expresses a non-negotiable human need. The poet writes:

*To be thirsty. To say, "I thirst."  
To close one's eyes and see the giant world  
that is born each time the eyes are closed.  
To see one's death. To see the darkening clouds  
as the tragic cloth of a day of mourning. To be the one  
mourned. To open the dictionary of the Beyond and discover  
what one suspected, that the only word in it  
is nothing. To try to open one's eyes, but not to be  
able to. To feel the mouth burn. To feel the sudden  
presence of what, again and again, was not said.  
To translate it and have it remain unsaid. To know  
at last that nothing is more real than nothing.*

Under ordinary circumstances, we tend to take our need for physical and social sustenance – air, water, and food, as well as nurture and companionship – for granted. But under conditions of extreme deprivation, we become powerfully aware of our utter dependence on the people and world around us for everything we need.

The image of a human being as self-sustaining and self-reliant plays a central role in the self-portrait of us as humans, and especially of us as Americans, and most especially of us who identify as male. But the image is a mirage – the product of wishful thinking.

In fact, we can't do anything on our own. We're utterly dependent. We can't even make water on our own, not even when we're thirsty. And we're never more aware of what we need than when it's not there. The fifth insight is that nothing is more real than the presence of what's absent.

THE SIXTH INSIGHT: Whatever happens creates new possibilities.

The sixth saying of Jesus from the cross was this: "It is finished." He declared that something had happened that could never be undone. His life had come to one particular and definite conclusion – one that could never be changed. What was done was forever done. The poet writes:

*“It is finished,” he said. You could hear him say it, the words almost a whisper, then not even that, but an echo so faint it seemed no longer to come from him, but from elsewhere. This was his moment, his final moment. “It is finished,” he said into a vastness that led to an even greater vastness, and yet all of it within him. He contained it all. That was the miracle, to be both large and small in the same instant, to be like us, but more so, then finally to give up the ghost, which is what happened. And from the storm that swirled in his wake a formal nakedness took shape, the truth of disguise and the mask of belief were joined forever.*

It’s true that, in the end, the story never ends. But it’s also true that, along the way, the story can’t be rewritten. We can’t unsay what we have already said or undo what we have already done. But even though we can’t rewrite the past, we can write the future. As long as we’re alive, we continually stand before a range of new possibilities for how the future will unfold. We choose from among them — what to say now and what to do now. Given the constraints of the past, which may be considerable, anything is possible. The sixth insight is that, in each moment, something final creates new possibilities.

THE SEVENTH INSIGHT: Today marks the beginning.

The seventh saying of Jesus from the cross was this: “Into your hands I commit my spirit.” The poet writes:

*Back down these stairs to the same scene,  
to the moon, the stars, the night wind. Hours pass  
and only the harp off in the distance and the wind  
moving through it. And soon the sun’s gray disk,  
darkened by clouds, sailing above. And beyond,  
as always, the sea of endless transparence, of utmost  
calm, a place of constant beginning that has within it  
what no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, what no hand  
has touched, what has not arisen in the human heart.  
To that place, to the keeper of that place, I commit myself.*

The Holy-Week journey from the darkness and death of Friday to the light and new life of Sunday is a journey all of us will probably make sometime in our lives. We

find ourselves in the dark — the darkness of loneliness, or failure, or grief, or self-doubt. When this happens, we may feel like the story of our lives has reached a tragic conclusion. We may feel like it's the end for us.

But as long as we continue to be given the gift of another day, it's not the end. Even if we find ourselves in the dark, we can look for the light to brighten our horizons — the light of a second chance, a fresh start, a new beginning. No matter what's past, we're constantly beckoned toward what's possible. And that's worth living for. The seventh insight is that today marks the beginning.