**THE FIRST WORD FROM THE CROSS**

**“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”**

*Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him.*

*When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus\* there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said,*

*“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”* Luke 23:32-34

***Deborah***

“No, my Lord! No!” The sound of my own anguished voice awakens me from a fitful sleep. Gasping for breath, I open my eyes and look around in confusion. I recognize a darkened room of Susanna’s house in Jerusalem. In the pale moonlight, familiar objects slowly form themselves; a chair, my sandals, a jug of water, my robe. My heart continues to pound as a soft breeze moves through the open window. I shiver. My body is cold with the sweat of fear left by the images of my dream.

Were it only a dream! I could cope then. But this dream happened.

For many days I had walked along beside him. I had served him as best as I could, by cooking, washing, or doing whatever else was needed. As the women and I prepared the meals, we talked among ourselves about what he was teaching us about God and about how to live. “Love your enemies,” he had said, “Do good to the people who abuse you.” Forgive someone for the same offense not just seven times, but seventy times seven. Be like the Father who forgave the son who squandered his inheritance.

Those were good days, full of purpose and reward. Then we came to Jerusalem and everything changed. As he spoke of the danger that loomed before him darkness stole into our hearts. When he taught us, we wondered if it might the last time. When we prayed together, my heart ached that his words of comfort may not be heard again. When we shared a meal, furtive glances revealed unspoken fear for him, and for ourselves. We were not wrong in that fear.

He made no cry when the huge spikes were driven into his hands and feet, but I cried out. I saw his legs and arms cramp in pain. I saw his body strain for the breath that would continue his life but prolong his agony. They had raised the cross. I could not even imagine what he felt. Then came those unbelievable words, spoken as he gasped for breath.

“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

How could he say that? It made no sense. They knew exactly what they were doing; all of them. The chief priests and the elders hated him because he had exposed their injustice and their lack of true devotion to God. The government wanted him out of the way - he was a threat to peace. The people thirsted for blood. They all knew what they wanted. They wanted him dead, an innocent man, and killed him like a common criminal.

Shivering again, I lay back down on the bed and look up at the ceiling. Why couldn’t I recall the good times; the wedding, the walks along the sea, the teaching, the feasts, the kindness he always showed. “It won’t go away,” I mourn to myself. “The image will never be dimmed. As he died in agony, I will live in agony, remembering.”

I thought Jesus would cry out at the injustice that was being done to him. He did so for others; but not for himself. Instead, he gasped those words of reconciliation.

“Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.”

How could he say that? I wanted to gouge out the eyes of Herod, Pilate, the chief priests, the soldiers and the crowd that thirsted for his blood.

His mother had been standing near me. I had turned to her, expecting to see the same confusion mirrored on her face. Instead, she stared ahead as if dazed and unmoved. “He has never ever disappointed me,” she had told me when I met her. “I don’t always understand him,” she had confessed, “but I trust that God is leading him in all things.”

I let my mind’s eye gaze again on her face as I lay in safety upon my bed.

“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

I remembered the other things that he had said from the cross. One by one I recited them, word for word, as if he were again first saying each one.

“Today you will be with me in Paradise.” He said this to one of the criminals who was crucified with him.

“Woman, behold your son. Behold your mother.” He said that to his mother and the disciple whom he loved the best.

He then cried out to God, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.” That hurt me deeply. How could God abandon him? Was God no better than the twelve?

Then he said something that puzzled me. “I thirst.” It was clear that he would soon die, yet he still had a very human need.

Finally the words of his dying.

“It is finished” and “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”

With a sinking feeling in my stomach and of profound shame at myself, I realize that, even in the midst of the pain and betrayal, even in his abandonment, he chose not to abandon us! He continued to show us the Way.

On that cross he gave us guidance for our journey. The words were there to help us: to be forgiving; to trust in the promise that we would be with him in God’s kingdom; to love and care for one another; that he too felt abandoned by God like we so often do; that a physical thirst that can remind us of a thirst for God; to accept the end of life; and to give of our life and death to God.

And so, it is not surprising to me that I keep coming back to the first words he spoke, for I felt as if they were spoken for me.

“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

I look hard and deep at that scene before the cross. What I hadn’t been able to face until now was this: When I turned from Mary back to the Lord who hung before me, I looked into his face. Through the blood and sweat that streamed down, I saw that his eyes were directly on me. They regarded me with gentleness and understanding as if, for that moment, the pain had ceased.

He had nodded his head at me, so slightly that no one else would have noticed. Then he winced in pain once more.

My heart had pounded so loudly I thought that the women around me would have heard it. I felt sick as the realization came; he knew. *He knew about me*. My Lord knew from what I was running and why. He was aware that I too, in an infinitely smaller way, bore a burden that could only be lifted through forgiveness; my forgiveness of others.

All the time that I was with him, only once did we talk privately. It was a gift I cherished. He had approached me one evening after the evening meal as I was rinsing my cooking pots in the river. “Thank you for the meal, Deborah. It was delicious and satisfying,” he had said kindly.

I looked up with a start from the pot that I was scrubbing to find Jesus looking down at me. He was smiling. Quickly I stood up, wiping my hands on my garment. Afraid to look into his face, I instead stared down at my sandals. “Thank you, Rabbi,” I whispered. “I’m glad you liked the meal.”

“Where are you from, Deborah,” he asked. “From Bethsaida, rabbi.” I continued to look down, thinking to myself, “Why would he talk to me?” I couldn’t think of anything to say, forgetting the many things that I often had dreamed of saying to him about his wisdom, his patience, his kindness with people whom everyone else shunned.

“This is hard work for you, isn’t it? he asked. “We have no rest. We are always moving,” Jesus reflected. “It isn’t that hard. I am happy to help,” I answered in sincerity. The silence that followed rang in my ears.

“You have been with us a long time, Deborah,” he said, breaking the eternity. “You must miss your family.” My heart skipped a beat. I think of my family all the time and try not to. I swallowed hard before I answered him. “I suppose so, rabbi,” I stammered, praying that he would ask me no more.

“When we come close to Bethsaida, you could journey to visit them,” he offered. “I suppose I could,” I replied, trying to sound enthusiastic. I continued to look at my sandals lest he see the fear in my eyes. Silence again.

“Deborah,” he said. “Look at me.” I raised my face until my eyes met his. I had never been so close to him before. How clear his eyes were; steady and penetrating, but not challenging. He nodded his head and smiled again. “Good,” he said with a small laugh. “I just wanted to make sure I was really talking to Deborah.” My fear melted away. I smiled too and opened my heart to hear what he would say next.

“Deborah, remember that even Joseph forgave his brothers,” he said with kindness.

In the safety and familiarity of the room, I turn and look out the window into the darkness. Gathering my courage with the image of his courage in my heart and mind, I search back through the journey of my life. Images form in my mind. Faces of family, of friends, of events, of estrangements, come to me with painful clarity.

I see my burden, my own cross and realize that I am a prisoner of my own anger and resentment. With tears in my eyes I realize the gift that he gave to me from the cross. He had known all along the terrible burden that I was carrying. He wanted me to forgive and to be free. I breathe the prayer that he had taught us.

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,

your kingdom come, your will be done

on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”

Could I forgive as he did? For a long time I lay upon the bed, thinking.

He had called for us to be transformed into people who served and loved each other just as he had loved and served us. He had changed all of us. He gave so much. He died because he was God’s voice, God’s presence.

Dawn is breaking over the distant hills as I step through the North Gate of the city. I hold my few belongings in my arms as I slowly walk up that the hill he had stumbled up only yesterday. I reach the place where he died. Looking down, I see his blood dried hard upon the cold ground. I bend down and gently touch it; the Blood of the new Covenant, he had said.

I am alone. I shiver in the chill of the early morning. Still kneeling, I see in the dim light, one of the spikes that had pierced his body. With dawn spreading its blanketing of gold across the hill, I reach out and pick up the blood-dried spike. Holding it against the gentle beating of my heart, I am at last able to face the pain, his and mine.

“We are to walk in his way now,” I say to the sun. “We are to do what he did, as best as we can.” With a deep breath I repeat his words, this time from my own heart, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

Standing up from that place of death, and yet, of hope, I turn and set my face for home.

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