

## A Lenten Journey of Faith and Growth

My new job with Weeminuche Construction has been going just great, until the last few weeks, that is. I had worked construction at the ski area for a long time, but had been diverted into hospital nursing for the last several years. Now, after leaving that position, I have been happy to be back among hard-working people, with a good project ahead of us. Weeminuche has just received the Bureau of Reclamation contract to build the dam south of Durango, a project that will continue for at least three years. One of the sub-projects is to drill and blast a tunnel 1400 feet through loose diagonal bands of sandstone intermixed with shale and mud layers. The miners working the tunnel are at risk for injury from falling wedges of rock, and of course, all the other hazards of working underground with explosives, so the Bureau requires that an emergency medical responder be on site at all times the miners are working in the tunnels.

So, I've been working in the evenings, doing database design and computer programming for them, and being available for accidents, which, thankfully, have not occurred. It's good work, but lonely, and I realized with the onset of the Lent season that I would be missing a very important part of the church year, the Lenten worship services which are held every Wednesday night throughout that season.

Several weeks ago, I talked with Terry, my boss, about it, and told him that I really needed Maundy Thursday off, so that I could attend services. I told him that, for me, this was the most sacred and meaningful day of the church year, and I explained why.

Three years ago I experience my first Maundy Thursday service. In the past six months, my life had changed dramatically. I had met Pastor Bolland and begun talking with him about theology and Christianity. Prior to meeting Pastor Bolland, I had been very involved in the local synagogue, struggling mightily to return to God through the faith of my ancestors, trying to please God and earn his pleasure by performing all the mitzva'ot I had neglected for most of my life. Pastor Bolland and I had met often, to discuss Judaism, Christianity, and the Scriptures that we, as Jews and Christians, share in common, as well as the Scriptures of the New Testament, which speak of Christ's fulfillment of the promises made so long ago. At some point, the Holy Spirit had worked through the patient proclamation he made of the Word of God, in the Gospel message of Jesus Christ, and how He, as God and man, was incarnate and came to earth to suffer, die, and sacrifice Himself for our sins, paying the price for me that I was trying so hard to pay myself, and very unsuccessfully.

Over those months, I came to respect Pastor Bolland greatly for his knowledge and love for God, and that winter he baptized me. On Palm Sunday, three years ago, I was confirmed as a communicant member of Our Savior Lutheran, again after many hours of instruction in the faith. I was ready for Holy Week, or so I thought!

That Wednesday, I shared a traditional Pesach (Passover) dinner with friends and family, as I have done every year for most of my life. But I was seeing things from a totally different point of view, with eyes of faith in Jesus Christ, and I saw significance in everything that I had never seen before. As we waited for Eliyahu to come and herald in the coming Messiah, I alone at that table realized that Elijah had already come, and so had the Messiah.

The next day was Maundy Thursday, and Pastor Bolland preached a sermon about the "Eyes of the Lamb", contrasting the innocent, but unknowing nature of the sacrifice of the Passover lamb with the innocent, but knowing sacrifice of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. After the Passover supper the previous night, I could not help but be moved by the great love of God for us, a God who would allow Himself to be sacrificed for us, as the lamb had been sacrificed for our sins.

Then, we shared in the blessings of Holy Communion as a congregation. I had not been communing long, but I understood the sacred nature of it, that this bread and wine were in truth the very body and blood of the Lamb of God, and that truth was almost too much to bear. It was too sacred. Immediately afterwards, Pastor Bolland asked us all to depart in silence, and he quickly walked away. When I got to the door where he normally stood, he wasn't there. He was gone. In the same way that Jesus, after sharing the Passover meal with his disciples, and instituting the Lord's Supper, was taken from them immediately afterward, so was my beloved teacher taken from us. The sense of grief and loss was palpable in the congregation as we all silently filed out, got in our cars and drove home.

The next two years evoked similar episodes of loss, grief, and anguish on Maundy Thursday. The Pastor, in the exercise of the keys, in many ways acts in the stead and by the command of the Lord Jesus Christ, most vividly expressed in the absolution of sins. That is part of the Office of the Holy Ministry, and it

is also very evident on this sacred night, as the pastor serves the congregation the Lord's Supper, and then is taken from them shortly thereafter, just as Jesus was taken from His own congregants, His disciples. As I grew in the faith, Maundy Thursday remained the most sacred day of the year, as it was the time for reflection and grieving on the suffering and mortal anguish of our Lord, all on account of my sin.

When I explained all that to Terry a few weeks ago, he promised me that I could have the night off. As it turned out, the person who could have worked for me was in the hospital, and there was no one else. If I didn't work, the entire tunnel crew would not be able to work, and we were behind schedule as it was. He told me I could not have the night off after all.

As I sat there at my desk that night, knowing that the rest of my congregation was experiencing this sacred night without me, I felt an incredible loneliness and anguish. These services were bitter-sweet as they were, and now I was cut off from the love and support of the congregation. I remembered the sense of loss and grief when Pastor Bolland was gone after the service, and remembered the lesson I had learned then, and experienced the fear and grief and absolute disorientation which the disciples must have felt on that night.

And then I remembered the words of Pastor Bolland's sermon the previous Sunday, when he talked about how Christ was abandoned, not only by his closest friends, His disciples, but also by the Father Himself. When He took our sins upon Himself, He was absolutely alone.

The word from Pastor Bolland's sermon haunted me.

*As He suffers alone in the garden of Gethsemane, so alone also to the whipping post and the cross He goes. I tell you there is no earthly help for Him. And even more profoundly, neither is there heavenly help for Him. For He must go to the cross also without the Father. For when He cries out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?", the Father abandons the Son to hell's fire and darkness. He is alone. This is God's Son, who willingly bears our sin to their most bitter end*

I realized that my loneliness was insignificant. Compared with that of Christ, I was ashamed of my own weakness. I have friends, I have my beloved teacher, and most importantly, I know that God has not, nor never will, abandon me as He did Christ that day, because Christ took that lonely death, the lonely abandonment that I deserved, upon Himself, so that I would never have to know that. My self-centered loneliness gradually was changed into an awareness, on a deeper level than I had heretofore known, of the depth of God's love for us, and the depth of His suffering on our behalf.

With that came God's healing, the brokenness of my heart replaced with awe, joy, and the love that comes only from Him as He calls each of us to Himself. Tomorrow morning the dawn brings us the resurrection of our Lord, as he left the empty tomb behind as He gained the victory over death and the grave, not only for Himself, but for each of us. And we too, through Christ alone, now know the victory over sin and death and the grave.

And this is the greatest thing in the world, this Gospel message of God's love and forgiveness. Thanks to faithful men like Pastor Bolland, that message, that Word, is getting out to unbelieving hearts, like mine, and changing them into hearts of faith, for all eternity.

By Julie Martinez