

The calendar says it's February, but the weather says April (at least on Thursday). As I began to write this sermon, the sky was blue and the sun was shining on a glorious spring day. The windows to my office were open and a refreshing breeze stirred the papers and the pastor.

Being refreshed and stirred is the promise and possibility of Lent. The term “Lent” comes from the Anglo-Saxon word for “spring”. We invest the 40 days from Ash Wednesday to Easter in reflection and repentance in the hope that the journey from ashes to lilies will refresh us, stir us, and make us new.

The preacher and poet J. Barrie Shepherd gave voice to this hope in his poem,

“Looking for Lent”

This Lent I'm looking
 For a change
 No longer giving up
 But taking on instead
 The task of noticing whatever
 Has been there unseen
 From the beginning
 Perceiving all those mysteries
 Monsters too and even
 The odd miracle which
 Until now escaped
 My eye caught up
 In catching up
 Who knows
 What may be glimpsed
 Between the Lenten rose
 And Easter's banks of lilies
 Perhaps even the footprints
 Of the gardener himself
 Whose waking walking word
 To us spells seeing
 Is believing. [\[1\]](#)

That we may be refreshed and stirred this Lent, our theme is the Seven Final Words of Jesus; seven things that Scripture records Jesus saying from the cross. We're going to notice these words, pay attention to them, and open our eyes to catch a glimpse of those footprints that put a spring in our step and a gleam in our eye.

This week, the first word from the cross is found in Luke; newly nailed to the cross, Jesus prays, *“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”* [\[2\]](#) The Greek suggests that this first word was a prayer he repeated over and over again, *“Father, forgive them; for they do*

not know what they are doing.”^[3] *“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”*^[4] *“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”*^[5]

Jesus is still praying that prayer. After the resurrection, he ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father. Seated there, he prays for us.

His prayer for us is what gives us confidence that we are forgiven – not our repentance, not the sorrow and regret we may feel. We know ourselves all too well; we feel one way today, another way tomorrow. We’re also experts at justifying ourselves. Our capacity to knowingly “not know what we are doing” is endless!

Consider Jesus’ two primary antagonists: The Roman soldiers and the Jewish leaders. They knew what they were doing. The soldier was doing his duty! Order had to be maintained! He had to keep the peace. Orders were orders! The Jewish leaders were doing God’s will! Holiness had to be maintained. They had to keep the faith! Commandments are not suggestions!

They knew what they were doing, yet they didn’t know what they were doing. In the name of their values and virtues, in the name of God, they participated in a terrible evil.

“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”^[6]

We don’t know the full extent of our sin. The knowledge is too much for us. The Human One knew, and it brought him to the cross. He died because he knew what we couldn’t bear to know; the vast chasm between a holy God and a sinful people, the full extent to which sin corrupts and defiles our best deeds as well as our worst.

We simply see the gap between our actions and our ideals and that’s too much for us. We fall short of our own expectations and abandon all hope. How can God forgive us when we cannot forgive ourselves? No wonder Lent is thought of as a 40 day immersion in guilt. When we look at ourselves without looking to the cross, there is no grace, no mercy, only guilt.

Jesus’ first word invites us to look beyond ourselves and keep the cross in view. We’re not forgiven because we’re sorry. We’re not forgiven because we prayed. We’re not forgiven because we somehow made up for it; our good deeds have balanced our bad deeds. We’re forgiven because Jesus died on the cross. We’re forgiven because he prayed for us and is still praying for us. We’re forgiven because God chose to bridge the vast chasm between God’s holiness and our sinfulness. God came to us because God knew we don’t know how to come to God. “There is more grace in God than sin in us.”^[7]

During this season of Lent, look beyond yourself. Look to the cross. Focus your attention there. Don’t let guilt drag you down. Let grace lift you up. Remember this day and every day since that terrible day on that hill far away, your Savior is praying for you, *“Father, forgive them.”* Amen.

^[1] J. Barrie Shepherd, “Looking for Lent,” 3/26/2004 in *The Presbyterian Outlook*, ed. Jack Haberer, vol. 194, No. 04, February 20, 2012,

p.11

[2] *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Lk 23:34). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

[3] *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Lk 23:34). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

[4] *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Lk 23:34). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

[5] *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Lk 23:34). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

[6] *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Lk 23:34). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

[7] Source unknown.