

At the Foot of the Cross: The Last Words of Jesus

By Margaret Smith

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DEDICATION

Adam, my grandson, has Asperger's Syndrome, a form of Autism. Adam is extremely bright but is painfully shy and introverted. His twin brother performs before groups every week, but Adam seeks the safety of the shadows. When I asked Adam to be Barabbas in "At the Foot of the Cross," I expected his usual refusal. Instead he said, "Tell me about Barabbas." Afterward, he decided to take the role. With the "Cross" cast, Adam became part of a group; he attended every rehearsal, took directions well, and created a powerful, albeit, pitiful character. In the performance on production night, his beautiful voice reverberated through our church parish hall as he fell on his knees and begged Jesus for mercy and forgiveness. What a bold step for Adam! So in honor of his landmark performance and his courage in spite of issues, I dedicate the play to Adam. By the way, in the Holy Week play this year, he played the part of Jesus!

STORY OF THE PLAY

Jesus' last words on the cross profoundly changed those who heard them. He continued to teach us how to live even in the final moments of His life as He hung on the cross in the agony of His execution. His lessons of forgiveness for the offender, salvation for the sinner, and trust and love for family and friends guide our daily lives. In this play, each character hears a phrase from Jesus' final utterances and reflects on its importance. Two narrators unify monologues delivered by characters whom Jesus affected during the course of His life. All characters are situated at the foot of the cross on which Jesus suffered and died. When Jesus rises, he has a message of hope for each one and a message for all of us. About thirty minutes.

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ORIGINAL PRODUCTION

Good Friday, April 3, 2015, in Spring, Texas, at Immanuel
United Church of Christ.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(6 m, 4 w, 2 flexible)

NARRATOR 1

NARRATOR 2

JESUS

JUDAS

BARRABAS

JOHN

PETER

WOMAN AT THE WELL

THOMAS

MARY, MOTHER OF JESUS

MARY'S SISTER

MARY MAGDALENE

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SETTING

The stage is bare except for 3 crosses with some disparity in sizes. The characters are seated in various places on low boxes, stools, or rocks. They are facing the cross.

Jesus' words come from behind the cross except for the last speech in which He steps out and delivers the speech to the audience.

Each character rises and faces the audience when speaking.

PROPS

Judas carries a rope looped over his arm. The Woman at the Well carries a water jar such as she might use when getting water from a well.

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(AT RISE: LIGHTS up. ALL characters are on stage except JESUS who speaks from behind the cross.)

NARRATOR 1: Jesus, the Christ, God's human form, serves as a model, a teacher for all of us who follow Him today, just as He modeled and taught to those in His lifetime. We study the Gospels to glean the lessons He presented us as He traveled and preached in the Judean countryside.

NARRATOR 2: He continued to teach all how to live even in the final moments of His life as He hung on the cross in the agony of His execution. The Gospels record Jesus' last words on the cross, phrases that impact us almost as powerfully as His sermons and parables. Tonight, travel again to the foot of the cross where our Lord suffers so dreadfully. You are there with some of those who were present with Him in life. Listen as Christ speaks His last; listen as these characters reflect on the meanings of Christ's words in their own lives—and in ours.

NARRATOR 1: Stand on Golgotha, the Place of the Skull. Imagine now. *(Beat.)* Hear the hammering of nails as they are used to secure Jesus to the cross. See the soldiers, insensitive and frivolous, laughingly divide up His clothes by casting lots. In the midst of excruciating suffering, Jesus asks God's forgiveness for His indifferent executioners.

JESUS: *(O.S.)* Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.

NARRATOR 2: At the foot of the cross, hear the man most in need of forgiveness, Judas Iscariot.

(JUDAS rises and delivers his monologue.)

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JUDAS: I sold Him out to the Romans for thirty pieces of silver. Greed is a filthy beast that consumed me— thirty pieces of silver for the greatest treasure imaginable, our Lord. I even kissed Him to show the centurions which one of the group they were seeking. My sin is the worst of all. I took blood money to betray an innocent man.

With a burden of such magnitude, I cannot continue to live. Before the sun goes down, I will hang from a rope on a crooked tree, the noose fashioned by my own hands.

Oh, Jesus, my beloved Jesus, forgive me— I did not know that my betrayal would have such consequences. When I saw that you were condemned to death, I went to the chief priests and tried to return the silver coins they had given me. I swore that you were truly innocent. They scorned my declaration and told me that your betrayal was my responsibility.

Now, I can only take comfort in your words— “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.” These words tell me that perhaps somewhere in the bounds of this great tragedy I can be redeemed. In the midst of His suffering, Jesus thought of others rather than himself. “Father, forgive them” ...executioners and betrayers. With this request, He teaches us to forgive even those who are not our friends— forgive evil ones and undesirable ones and those who unduly persecute. In these words, I pray He is asking forgiveness for me also.

Guilt burns me, envelopes me. (*To the cross.*) Father, please forgive me. (*Returns to original position.*)

NARRATOR 2: In the audience at the cross: callous soldiers and a greedy, but repentant, Judas. Flanking Jesus on the cross are two robbers being crucified with him. One mocks him, and as the story goes, the other robber ponders Jesus’ fate. He says to Jesus, “We deserve to die, but you have done nothing wrong.” The criminal pleads, “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

JESUS: (O.S.) I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in Paradise.

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NARRATOR 1: There is one more criminal at the cross who takes these words to heart. He is a man guilty of murder, robbery, and insurgency. That man is Barabbas.

(BARABBAS rises and delivers his monologue.)

BARABBAS: Jesus Barabbas and Jesus bar Joseph. Our names compare; our souls contrast. I would murder if I had to; I would rob if I wanted to; I would lead rebellions if I was asked to. He taught people to love; He healed people; He walked about doing good. Our contrasting lives touched when Pontius Pilate, following the tradition at Passover, offered the people a choice for the crucifixion. Him or me? Let the crowd decide, Pilate said.

Guess what? They decided. In anger and hysteria, they chose me to live and this perfect one to die. Isn't that just like people?

Did freedom bother me? Not hardly. There was no hope for me, and I did not care. Not until, out of curiosity, I walked up this hill and saw the face of the man on the cross. My blood turned to ice; yet I perspired. My pardon had led to this. I was not guilty, but I was guilty.

Could I, like the criminal beside Jesus, be forgiven for a life of sin? Jesus promised, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." Can sinners hope for Paradise?

He said so.

Oh, Jesus, the crowd let me go and in doing so condemned me, worthless me, to a life of scorn and a legacy of shame. I am destined to be remembered as the man who lived so that Jesus would die. That's a terrible stigma to carry for all my years. Take me with you, Holy Man, with you and the criminal beside you, and all who repent and ask for mercy. Please make a place for all of us in Paradise. *(Returns to original position.)*

End of Freeview

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