

30 March 2011  
Lent 3 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“The Miracle of the Splitting Rocks”

Text: Matthew 27:51c

(Romans 8:18-30; Matthew 26:57-27:10)

After the darkness, the Temple curtain being torn in two, and the earth shaking, the next miracle at the crucifixion of our Lord is that then, ***the rocks were split***.

Now, at first glance, or first hearing, it might seem that they split simply because of the earthquake; that that’s just what happens.

But the grammar of the Greek Scriptures specify this *as a separate sign*. And even more than that, the word used to describe what happened to the rocks, that is here translated as “split,” is actually the very same word used of the Temple curtain being torn in two. Or in other words, the rocks didn’t just crack - *they were being torn in two*.

And not small rocks were these, and not even big rocks like boulders. The word used there, *petros*, means the rock that is the foundation of the earth, bedrock; it was the kind of big and solid rock into which tombs were cut.

And so with these words and this next sign, it sounds as if the world was falling apart. Which, maybe it was. Creation had just killed its Creator. And while man may not have cared, creation did. And it trembled and began to come apart.

But creation did not come apart, a work which could only be attributed to the merciful hand of God. For even though His Son had just been slaughtered on the cross, and we would like to blame Pilate, or the Roman soldiers, or the Jewish leaders, or the cowardly disciples - none of them were truly responsible for it. God Himself was.

It was God Himself, John tells us, *who so loved the world that He sent His Son* into the world to be our Saviour and lay down His life for us (John 3:16). It was God Himself, Isaiah tells us, *who laid upon Jesus the iniquity of us all* (Is 53:6). It was God Himself who did this, to save a world that was falling apart. A world where man turns against man, beast against beast, and all creation is groaning under the burden of sin. Yet God doesn’t hate His creation, but loves it. And so sent His Son, born of the virgin and named Jesus, that through His death and resurrection, all creation might be made new.

And so when the sun stopped shining when Jesus was on the cross and all the earth was covered in darkness (Matt 27:45), God caused the sun to shine again. And now, while the earth trembles and the rocks are torn in two when Jesus dies, the merciful hand of God comforts His creation, stopping the trembling and the tearing. This is not the end. For the Son is going to shine again! There is going to be a resurrection, when the tomb that was cut out of a rock is going to be torn open! Sin and death will not win - life and forgiveness will. And when Jesus is raised from death, it will be the Feast of Victory for our God. For all creation.

And so that we do not think of the splitting rocks as being “just another miracle” that surrounded the crucifixion, I wonder if using the word for *tearing* with the rocks was to make us think of the ancient practice of tearing, or rending, ones clothes as a sign of mourning.

We heard tonight from Matthew that the high priest torn his clothes at Jesus’ trial, in mourning and dismay over what he considered blasphemy; and that is how we began this Lenten season, with the words of Joel, which told us to “*rend our hearts and not our garments*” (Joel 2:13). Or in other words, to mourn and repent of our sin and rebellion against God our Creator.

And even more than God seemed to comfort His trembling creation, will He comfort us trembling sinners. A comfort that started even from the cross, when Jesus prayed, “*Father, forgive them*” (Luke 23:34), and then when He comforted the thief hanging next to Him, saying to him “*Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise*” (Luke 23:43).

For if Lent is a time to take stock of our sin and tremble, to see in the cross the awful price of our sin and rend our hearts, **even more** is it a time to see the mercy and love of God for us in Jesus and be comforted. Comforted with the Word of God, that no matter how grievous your sin, your sin has been dealt with; you have forgiveness in Jesus.

That is the comfort Peter needed. After denying Jesus three times, we heard tonight that *he went out and wept bitterly*. Or perhaps we could paraphrase that: he went out trembling and rending his heart. Peter, who Jesus named rock, *petros*, was being rent, or torn apart - just as the rocks at Jesus’ death.

That was the comfort Judas also needed, after he went back to the chief priests, returned the blood money, and confessed his sin, saying: “***I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.***” The priests, who were in the forgiveness business, should have spoken to him of forgiveness! That was their job. But they did not. They left him with his sin. And without the comfort of forgiveness, Judas fell apart.

And that is the comfort we need. For *our* sin is tearing us apart, whether we realize it or not. And our sin is making us fall apart, wearing us down and wearing us out, and leading us to the grave. For sin is un-creation, anti-creation, a destroyer. Death is sin made visible.

**But Jesus is love made visible.** The love of God for you, that you be not comfortless, that you not be without hope, that you not be left in despair, but see in Him your hope of life, both now and forever.

And so our Lord has given us His Word that we may see Jesus aright, and know His love and forgiveness. For just seeing Jesus on the cross isn't enough. The thief next to Jesus saw Him there, but he needed to hear, as we need to hear, **that He's there for us** - for our forgiveness, for our life. He's there to die for us, that we might rise with Him. That we who are falling apart, might be raised to a new life.

And that - the love of Jesus and His forgiveness - is now the *petros*, the bedrock or foundation, of our lives. A foundation not like this earth, which can be shaken and torn apart, but stronger than that! He is a foundation that cannot be shaken and will last forever.

And so tearing rocks have something to teach us. This Lenten season and always, let us rend our sinful hearts of stone in mourning for our sin, and receive the comfort of the forgiveness of our Saviour and His resurrection, and live a new life.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.