

People What to Know - Sermon Series for Lent

VII. "Why Hast Thou Forsaken Me?"

Text: II Corinthians 5:16-21; Matthew 27:45-54

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And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabbachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Matthew 27:46

In the four gospels of the New Testament, there are four different accounts of the crucifixion of Jesus. In many Christian churches, it has long been a tradition on Good Friday to focus on the seven last words or sayings which, according to the gospel accounts, Jesus speaks from the cross before he dies. Usually, all seven words are read, followed by seven meditations. These seven meditations are accompanied by prayer and the singing of hymns. (1) You will be relieved to know that I will preach only one sermon today.

When I was younger, I could recite, in the formal language of the King James Version of the Bible, the seven last words of Jesus from the cross. Perhaps some of you could recite them as well:

"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

"Verily I say unto thee, today thou shalt be with me in Paradise."

"Woman, behold thy Son!"

"My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

"I thirst."

"It is finished."

"Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."

Today we conclude our Lenten sermon series on questions people ask with the fourth word from the cross – the "forsakenness question" – Jesus asked at the lowest point of his earthly life. In her wonderful book on the seven last words, Episcopalian theologian and preacher Fleming Rutledge writes, "This saying from the cross is **the** saying if you can only deal with one." It is the only word that is reported by two different gospel writers, both Matthew and Luke. It is the one that most causes us to tremble, tremble, tremble, and yet, ironically, once its depths are plumbed, it is the one saying that offers the most comfort. (2)

If you are familiar with Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, you know how Bach puts around numerous sayings of Jesus a "halo of strings", but not around this "Cry of Dereliction." (3)

"My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" It stands alone, totally out there by itself. At the end of his life, Jesus endured the cross alone, forsaken, utterly at the mercy of the forces of darkness and death. (4)

On top of the steeple of Morningside Church, there is a cross, a beautiful cross reaching up to heaven, an empty cross, symbolizing the victory of God in Christ over the forces of darkness and death. I myself prefer the empty cross. I find it painful to reflect upon the isolation and suffering of Jesus on the cross. I prefer to read the accounts of Easter. I prefer Paul's glad post-resurrection questions to the stark gospel accounts of the crucifixion.

Paul asks, "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

Paul asks, "What can separate us from the love of God? Can tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine. . .?"

"No!" Easter faith shouts back. "No, nothing in all of creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Why do we have to go to the dark place and focus on the death of Christ and his anguished cry, which he uttered as his life came to an end? Why? Because of the temptation to bypass the painful scene on Calvary, go directly to the empty tomb, and join in the annual rousing rendition of the "Hallelujah Chorus".

Perhaps this little aside will illustrate how tempting it is to trivialize the suffering and death of our Lord. I found in my files this week something a colleague gave me years ago: "Dear Pastor," it begins, "I have invented something that will serve as a wonderful educational gift to young Christian minds. I have invented Crystal Crosses. They come in a ready-to-use kit, a kit that grows 'a gazillion itsy-bitsy crystal crosses in gelatin'. Each kit contains the gelatin, calcium chloride, a magnifying glass, and a great big jar to grow the cross crystals in. It also comes with an explanation of how this kit is just like the love of Jesus. \$14.95 plus shipping and handling. Don't forget the \$2 rebate."

We need to remember that Jesus died, and the way he died, lest we deny the meaning and purpose of his life and his death, lest we diminish the sacrificial nature of God's love. As Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us in her book, *God in Pain*, "Christianity is the only world religion that confesses a God who suffers." "No, it is not a very popular idea, even among Christians," but you cannot have Christianity without the cross; you cannot have a redeemed world without Christ and him crucified.

Perhaps more than ever, we need to go deep into the senseless act of wanton violence that lies at the heart of the Christian story. An innocent man who claims to be – is said to be – the Son of the living God – is tried, convicted, mocked, scorned, deserted, and hung up to die. Think of all the terrible things that are happening in our world today: the wanton violence that was acted out as two college co-eds in one week, Eve Carson, student body president at the University of North Carolina, Lauren Burke, a co-ed at Auburn University, were murdered for absolutely no good reason. Think of the slaughter of the young students in Jerusalem – oh the cruelties that human beings are capable of...

Coming back from Richmond this week, I read an article from the *Atlantic Monthly* on the airplane. I was drawn by the title of the article: "God's Country". I began to read about the terrible religious dissention and warfare that are taking place in Nigeria. I first read of a massacre of Christians in the sanctuary of a Christian church by Muslims, and I was horrified. Then, I came to another paragraph that told me of the retaliatory massacre of Muslims by Christians.

Dorothy Soelle wrote of the "matter-of-course destruction of life around us, and the matter-of-course cynicism that is our constant companion" in modern life. Only a real cross, occupied by a real Savior, who has gone all the way down through the worst that life can do, only a crucified God can help us conquer the powers that enslave, dominate, and corrupt. Only a real Savior.

And so to Calvary we go. The sky has turned dark. Both the world and the one who hangs on the cross are enveloped in darkness. At three o'clock in the afternoon, Jesus cries out with a loud voice, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When some of the bystanders hear it, they say, "This man is calling for Elijah." Tradition had it that Elijah the prophet would return as the precursor of the Messiah. Also, Elijah was believed to be the one who came to the aid of the righteous in trouble. Any talk of Elijah is nothing more than cynical ridicule, as is the offering of the sponge soaked with sour wine a cynical expression of the fulfillment of Psalm 69. (5)

Jesus cries out once more in a loud voice and breathes his last.

Where Is God? In this heart-breaking scene, any sense whatsoever of God's presence or power is absent. "There is a story that one day in Auschwitz a group of Jews put God on trial. They charged God with cruelty and abandonment. A court was formed. There was a lawyer for the opposition and a prosecution, a lawyer for the defense. Arguments were heard on both sides. At the end of the proceedings, they conferred on their findings and rendered a verdict. The rabbi stood up to make the formal pronouncement: "The jury finds God guilty as charged. Now, let us bow our heads in prayer." (6)

The last words uttered by Jesus in Matthew's gospel are a prayer. He could have used any form of expression. He could have expressed rage, given the cruel

nature of the means of execution, but instead he prays. Actually what he does is scream a prayer. And what a prayer it is! He abandons his usual means of address, which is the intimate “Abba,” “Father”. Now, he no longer presumes intimacy. He uses “a form of address that is common to all people: “My God!” (7) He is totally identified with human beings. Then, he continues by quoting the opening lines of Psalm 22: *For what reason have you abandoned me? Why have you abandoned me?* Notice that Jesus does not question the existence of God; neither does he question the power of God. He is questioning the silence of God. (8)

The women of the church and I have been studying the Psalms this year. Again and again, we have heard Israel crying out in a similar way from the depths of despair. What is so moving in these Psalms of lament is that no matter how far away God appears to be, the relationship with God is presupposed. The failure of God to answer prayer does not lead to disbelief or atheism. No, what it leads to virtually every time, is more prayer. More intense prayer. God must be addressed, even if God does not answer. A good Jew to the end, Jesus refuses to accept the victory of evil over goodness. He refuses to be silent in the face of God’s silence. He cries out in hope, yes, hope. You don’t pray if you’ve lost hope. You don’t pray if you’ve lost hope.

My favorite Easter story is one I have told in many Easter sermons about the school teacher who was assigned to visit children in a large city hospital, to help them with their school work while they were in the hospital. One day she got called to visit a young boy. She went to his room, but as she entered the door of the ward, she realized she was in the hospital’s burn unit. She was not prepared to find a young boy horribly burned and in great pain. She really wanted to turn around and walk away, but she knew she couldn’t do that, so she awkwardly stammered to the boy in the bed, “I’m your teacher, the hospital teacher. I’m here to help you with nouns and adverbs.” She had never felt more ridiculous in her life. The boy was in such pain, he barely responded. She stumbled through the English lesson. Then, ashamed of herself, she left.

The next morning, a nurse on the burn unit asked her as she came into the hospital, “What did you do to that boy?” Before she could apologize, the nurse interrupted, “Ever since you were here yesterday, his whole attitude has changed. He’s fighting back. It’s as if he’s decided to live.”

Later, the boy explained he had completely given up hope, until the teacher came. It all changed when he came to a simple realization. They wouldn’t send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a dying boy, would they? (9)

You wouldn’t pray if you had lost all hope in God, would you? Why is it that Jesus had to undergo the experience of descending to a place where it appeared as if God were not present? Martin Luther says that Jesus descended into hell and that his descent cry is found in the words, “Why have you forsaken me?”

Paul explains the forsakenness of Jesus by God this way: For our sake, God made him to be sin, who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (II Corinthians 5:21) It wasn't God telling Jesus what to do. Jesus and the Father were in on this together from the beginning. Willingly, voluntarily, Jesus gave of himself totally for the redemption of the world. He became sin so that we might become the righteous of God. He chose God-forsakenness, God-separation, so that we could be reconciled to God and to our enemies and to one another, thereby insuring that the world would no longer be under the tyranny of violence and disharmony. No matter what the murderers do, no matter what terrible things happen, the victory has been won, and of Christ's kingdom, there will be no end.

The Roman centurion, who had no idea what was going on and had never read Psalm 22, got it the day Jesus was crucified: *Truly, this man was God's own son*. He died that we might no longer live for ourselves but live for him and through him, be whole. For one terrible, dark afternoon, God and Jesus, out of their own choosing, were separated. Jesus descended into the hell of absence of God. He did it for us; he and the Father did it for everyone who has been laid low by life.

I may not know whether or not God answers your prayers in a specific sense, but I do know, in the larger sense, the big answer has already been given. In the silence of a Friday afternoon, 2000 years ago, after the ridicule, after jeering, came a helpless cry of utter abandonment. After the cry, came the death. After the death, came God's big answer, not in words, but in the form of a life laid down, a body raised up, a stone rolled away, and a world that will never be the same again.

- (1) Fleming Rutledge, *The Seven Last Words*, William B. Eerdmans, 2005, p. ix.
- (2) Ibid. p.37.
- (3) Ibid.
- (4) Ibid., quoting Jaroslav Pelikan, *Bach Among Theologians*.
- (5) David Buttrick, *The Mystery and the Passion*, Augsburg Fortress Press, 1992, p. 173.
- (6) Barbara Brown Taylor, *God in Pain*, Abingdon Press, 1998, p. 119.
- (7) Buttrick
- (8) Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, Volume II, Doubleday, 1994, p.1046.
- (9) Joyce Hollyday, *Sojourners*, March, 1986.