

November 16: My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?
(Mark 15:21-39)

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Welcome, my fellow travelers, to our series on Jesus and his complicated questions. Jesus was 40 times more likely to ask a question than give a direct answer, a practice that challenged and transformed (and sometimes angered) those around him. In today's sermon, instead of exploring a question that Jesus asked his followers or his listeners, we're going to wrestle with a question Jesus asked directly of God, a question that was met with silence. It's a tough story, but one that I believe is ultimately hopeful for those of us who wrestle with painful, unanswered questions.

Before we engage today's question, please join me in prayer.

Faithful God, you promised that you would never leave or forsake us. As we wrestle with your own divine Son's cry of forsakenness today, may your promise become ever more real to us, and may we trust your presence with us in our own experiences of loneliness and abandonment. Amen.

In May of 1918, an abusive plantation owner in southern Georgia was murdered, and his death prompted a series of 13 lynchings that targeted not only the man who committed the murder, but 12 other African Americans. One of those victims was Hayes Turner, who was seized by a mob and hung from a tree. When Hayes' wife Mary, who was eight months pregnant, discovered what had happened to him, she refused to stay silent. She denounced her husband's lynching and threatened legal action.

It didn't take long for the mob to focus its hatred on Mary. They pursued her as she fled, captured her, hung her upside down from a tree, and tortured her. They brutally murdered her and her unborn baby and defaced both bodies. Despite the fact that the perpetrators of this horrific public crime were well known, no one was ever charged. The Associated Press defended the lynching as a natural consequence of Mary Turner's "unwise remarks" and attitude.

The Turner family represent just three of the over 4000 documented incidents of lynching crimes against African Americans between 1877 and 1950. These acts of cruelty, sadism, and terror were celebrations of white

supremacy that were often advertised ahead of time and drew large crowds, including women and children. Lynchings were public spectacles, celebrated with postcards and the sale of grisly souvenirs from the victims' bodies. They were powerful and deliberate threats, calculated to instill fear in the Black community and keep them submissive and subordinate. And they were allowed to continue, unchecked, for decades.

And here's the question we, as people of faith, cannot help but ask: Where was God in these thousands of lynchings? Where was God when Mary hung upside down from a tree and cried out in terror and pain? Where is God today when parents are seized by ICE and separated from their children, in our own country, and led away? Where is God when a single mother tries to feed her children after losing SNAP benefits? Where is God in our own lives when we are hurting and desperate and cry out for help and are met with silence? Why does God seem to forsake those who need God most, in their most dire moments?

In the story that we read today, from the gospel of Mark, Jesus cried out to God with this very question. Like victims of lynching, Jesus was unjustly seized and hung on a cross to undergo a slow, public, tortuous death, a grisly spectacle calculated to strike fear and submission into the hearts of a subordinate population. Like victims of lynching, Jesus was surrounded by a jeering crowd, and his garments were gamboled away as souvenirs. He was tortured for hours, and he was utterly alone and abandoned by all who loved him – his disciples had fled, and in Mark's telling of the story, even the women who followed Jesus watched from a distance.

It was nine in the morning when they crucified Jesus, it was noon when darkness fell over the land, and it was three hours later - after six total hours of agony and isolation and humiliation – that Jesus finally cried out with a loud voice: *"Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?"* "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In Mark's account, these are the first words that Jesus speaks since his trial, and they are an expression of utter bewilderment and abandonment, a cry from Jesus to the God who is *his* God, the God who called Jesus his beloved Son, the God whose will Jesus had always done, the God Jesus had been with in the creation of the world that had just rejected and crucified him. And God's response to Jesus' desperate cry was utter silence.

In his cry of forsakenness, Jesus quoted the beginning of Psalm 22, a prayer of individual lament and desperation. But he didn't speak the Hebrew of the original Psalm – he cried out to God in Aramaic, his mother tongue, the raw language of his heart and his gut. And Jesus' Aramaic words are recorded, verbatim, in a gospel that is otherwise written in Greek – it's as if those that heard Jesus' cry of agony couldn't possibly imagine it in any other language, with any other words than the exact ones Jesus uttered, because they were so full of raw, powerful emotion.

In the literature and culture of Jesus' day, heroic people died with serenity and dignity and stoicism; like Socrates, who cheerfully drank his poison hemlock and comforted his friends. Jesus' death wasn't like that. It was messy and humiliating and contemptable, and highlighted Jesus' physical vulnerability and suffering, as well as his mental and spiritual agony, in a way that scandalized some readers and commentators. In fact, the gospel writers Luke and John leave out Jesus' cry of forsakenness in their own accounts, suggesting it might have been too raw and challenging even for them. And it's not uncommon to work Jesus' cry of dereliction into a theological framework of atonement that makes sense of his words and creates some distance between them and us.

But for people who know what it is to be forsaken, to suffer without cause, and to be impotent in the face of injustice, the story of Jesus' suffering and abandonment and bewilderment becomes a powerful narrative of solidarity that sustains them in the midst of their own suffering, because they know that they are not abandoned. Womanist theologian Shawn Copeland writes that "If the makers of the spirituals gloried in singing of the cross of Jesus, it was not because they were masochistic and enjoyed suffering. Rather, the enslaved Africans sang because they saw on the rugged wooden planks One who had endured what was their daily portion. The cross was treasured because it enthroned the One who went all the way with them and for them."¹

In his powerful book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, James Cone describes the horrors of lynching and then writes that "God must know in a special way what poor blacks are suffering in America because God's son was lynched in Jerusalem...The cross speaks to oppressed people because it places God in the midst of crucified people, in the midst of people who are hung, shot, burned, and tortured." Because Christian faith emerges

¹ Shawn Copeland, *Wading Through Many Sorrows*, p.120

from the scandal of the cross, Cone claims, “it is the faith of abused and scandalized people – the losers and the down and out. It was this faith that gave blacks the courage to hope, ‘to keep on keeping on,’ struggling against the odds.”²

In my opening sermon to this series on questions, I brought up the common phrase, “Jesus is the answer,” and questioned the way it’s often interpreted as “Jesus has all the answers”, reducing Jesus to a divine answer-man or self-help guru. I want to clarify, though, that I *do* believe that Jesus is God’s answer to our suffering and pain and forsakenness – not by showing us how to avoid it, but by enduring it with us and for us, in complete solidarity, and taking God’s unbroken love and power and life into the very center of our most profound brokenness.

And because Jesus himself experienced forsakenness and injustice, cried out to God in pain, and experienced God’s silence, we can know that in our own most intense moments of forsakenness and questioning, we are not alone. When we cry out to God and don’t hear a response, we can know that Jesus went there before us, Jesus understands, Jesus is there with us now, and all of Jesus’ power and love are surrounding us, even when can’t see or feel it. In our very moments of feeling most alone and helpless, Jesus is most present. This is how God answers us.

In his reflection last year on Jesus’ cry of forsakenness, the late Pope Francis wrote this prayer: “Jesus, this prayer of yours is unexpected: you cry out to the Father in your abandonment. You, the eternal Son, dispense no answers from on high, but simply ask *why*? At the height of your passion, you experience the distance of the Father... Why? So that you can plunge into the abyss of our pain. You did this for my sake, so that when I see only darkness, when I experience the collapse of my certainties and the wreckage of my life, I will no longer feel alone, but realize that you are there beside me...Glory to you, Lord Jesus, for you did not flee from my pain and confusion, but tasted them to the full. Praise and glory to you, for you bridged every distance in order to draw near to those who were farthest from you. In my own dark night, when I keep asking *why*, I find you, Jesus, the light that shines in the darkness.”³

² James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, p.158, 26, 160.

³ <https://wherepeteris.com/pope-francis-meditates-on-jesus-cry-of-abandonment/>

Jesus' cry invites us to express our own laments and "why's" to God – his bold and painful question embraces all of our own. And perhaps it is through our courage the ask the "why" questions that we understand more clearly what breaks God's heart, and find the strength and power and love to persevere in hope and faith in the work of justice, to struggle against the odds, even when they're stacked against us.

By submitting to a death that was unjust, humiliating, and scandalous, Jesus invites us to see his face in those who suffer injustice, with those who are forgotten and forsaken, with those who cry out for help and are unanswered, with those who are oppressed and rejected and bowed down with sorrow. James Cone writes that "the cross is impossible to embrace unless we are standing in solidarity with those who are powerless."⁴

We need to see Jesus' face and body in the victims of lynching and injustice, to hear his cry of dereliction in theirs. And when we recognize Jesus' face in another, we are invited to serve them as we would Jesus, to stand in solidarity with them just as Jesus did in his life and death with us, to make sacrifices for their freedom.

I'd like to invite us to do a call and response prayer together, inspired by Pope Francis' meditation on Jesus' question from the cross. I will read a phrase, and then invite you to respond with these words: "Jesus, help me to recognize you and love you."

In lonely or abandoned or hurting children,

Jesus, help me to recognize you and love you.

In young people who long for someone to hear their cry of pain,

Jesus, help me to recognize you and love you.

In the many elderly people left alone and forgotten,

Jesus, help me to recognize you and love you.

In prisoners and those who are detained,

Jesus, help me to recognize you and love you.

In those who are fearful because of their skin color or immigration status or gender or sexual identity,

Jesus, help me to recognize you and love you.

⁴ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, p.162.

In those who suffer lynching and violence and abuse of any kind,

Jesus, help me to recognize you and love you.

In those who struggle with prolonged sickness and loss,

Jesus, help me to recognize you and love you.

In those peoples most exploited and ignored,

Jesus, help me to recognize you and love you.

Amen. May it be so.

The cross has been a powerful and hopeful symbol to victims of oppression and injustice for thousands of years – not just because it expresses Christ’s solidarity with them in their forsakenness, but because Jesus’ crucifixion is not the end of the story. If the gospel accounts ended with Jesus’ cry of utter abandonment, God’s silence, and the triumph of empire and evil; if Jesus submitted to unjust death and forsakenness in solidarity with us and was buried and that was the end of the story, then we who follow Jesus and long for a just world are, of all people, most to be pitied.

But, thanks be to God, the story we stake our faith on doesn’t end with death and defeat. Jesus’ question of divine forsakenness is the first verse of Psalm 22; but if you read on to verse 24, you will hear that God “has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him, but has listened to his cry for help.” God never abandoned Jesus, and God will never abandon us. Even as he experienced the full weight of God’s silence and the world’s injustice, Jesus was quoting words from a psalm that ends with the hungry fed, the powerful bending their knee before God, and the righteous sufferer vindicated.

God’s final word on suffering and injustice is not silence, it’s not death, and it’s not the triumph of worldly powers and systems of oppression. Because on the third day, Jesus rose again. He disarmed the powers and authorities and made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross (Colossians 2:15). Jesus’ resurrected body is his ultimate vindication, revealing all powers of injustice and hatred to be impotent, meaningless, and temporary.

According to Shawn Copeland “the enslaved African sang [of the cross] because they saw the results of the cross – triumph over the principalities and powers of death, triumph over evil in this world.”⁵

James Cone agrees, writing that, “While the lynching tree symbolized white power and ‘black death,’ the cross symbolized divine power and ‘black life’ – God overcoming the power of sin and death...The final word about black life is not death on a lynching tree but redemption in the cross – a miraculously transformed life found in the God of the gallows.”⁶

Because of the cross, neither the lynching tree nor any other form of oppressive power and domination will ever have the final word. If torture and abandonment and death was not the end for Jesus’ body, we have hope that it is not the end for the bodies of people who were lynched, like Hayes and Mary Turner and their child. We have hope that it’s not the end for those who experience forsakenness and defeat and injustice. We have hope that it’s not the end for those we love and lose. We have hope that even in our own experiences of profound abandonment and darkness, God is not only with us, but God has already opened the way for our own redemption and rebirth and vindication. We have hope that the small actions we take towards justice and liberation are meaningful and lasting.

May we have the courage to live as people of the cross who stand in solidarity with those who are suffering and forsaken, following the steps of our Savior who chose the path of forsakenness and suffering in solidarity with us. And as we do this, may we share in the hope and liberation of our resurrected Lord. Amen.

⁵ Copeland, *Wading Through Many Sorrows*, p.120.

⁶ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, p.18, 23.