

Pain or Promise:
My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?
Mark 15:33-38 & Romans 8:35-39

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This Scripture presents a real challenge for those who read it and ponder. Often what comes to mind is “why would God let his son Jesus suffer so terribly to the point that Jesus uttered this painful cry? My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? Or in some translations, why have you abandoned me or why have you deserted me? Particularly poignant is the translation in The Message: Jesus groaned out of the depths, My God, My God why have you abandoned me?

This morning it behooves us to ask a different question for ourselves. Does the verse reflect unreconciled pain or does this scenario hold a promise? The answer that we find to this question can have an impact on ourselves when we feel so overwhelmed with physical, emotional or spiritual pain that we may feel as Jesus did. Goodness knows there are many situations that have confronted each of us that may have led us to wonder “Where are you God? Don’t you hear me as I pray?

Recently I saw a Charles Schultz cartoon that reminded me of this struggle. Mind you, I do not find this topic humorous and I am not making fun of this serious verse and its implications. However, let me share this thought with you. The cartoon depicts a strong wind storm and a tree is bending in the wind. Snoopy is holding on for dear life with his body extended horizontally. The caption reads, “Faith is holding on tightly when the going gets windy.”

Now let’s look at the Scripture more closely. First of all, the mechanism of crucifixion was designed to bring about excruciating pain and suffering. Just by the position of the body on the cross, it was very difficult to get a breath. If you rose up your body by straightening your legs, the pain in your feet would nearly prevent it. Eventually you die of asphyxiation. Add to that the overall pain in the limbs caused by the unnatural stretching. In addition, there would be the pain from the beatings that Jesus endured prior to the crucifixion. Then the crown of thorns would pierce the skin and cause pain throughout the head. Jesus was also dehydrated and weak from blood loss. All of these things alone would have caused him to cry out as he did.

As if these physiologic things were not enough, consider the emotional pain Jesus had experienced prior to his trial. Peter denies knowing him, the disciples fall asleep in the garden rather than stay awake with him, and the citizens who had hailed him as King of the Jews, now turn on him and ask for his crucifixion. Not to mention that Judas would betray him for 30 pieces of silver.

To make this more real, have you not had someone make fun of you, or endured some family disagreements that had the potential to break up treasured relationships? I still can remember an incident in my life that was nearly the last straw. My daughters and I were going through some pretty stressful times and our relationships were wearing thin. One day I received a call from my oldest daughter and she made a critical comment about a decision that I had made. The comment, though not the worst thing, was enough to put me over the edge. I got off the phone, literally ran down the hall and dropped to my knees to pray. I remember saying out loud “I just can’t take any more.” Obviously, things did get better. Our family relationships improved and we are a tight knit family. But at that moment, I did not have any hope. The point I am making is this: Jesus’ suffering and death captures all of the despair and grief that we not only have suffered ourselves but the suffering that has been inflicted upon others throughout human history. It is all right to feel that we cannot take any more or are at our wits end. Think of it this way: we can pray to Jesus in times of despair because he understands what it feels like. He *chose* to identify with those who are suffering; he has compassion for us.

Despite the intensity of his suffering, Jesus still turned toward God. He said, “My God, My God.” The personal pronoun “my” reflects a personal relationship; in this case, Jesus’ personal relationship to God. Despite feeling abandoned, Jesus turns to God in prayer. He did not give up on calling upon God. There is a realization that there is no separation between Jesus and God, nor is there anything that can separate us from God. We may at times turn away, but God is always there, waiting and willing to listen.

In the text it mentions that the curtain of the temple was torn in two as Jesus died. The curtain separated the holy of holies from the rest of the temple. Within that part of the temple rested the Ark of the Covenant and other sacred relics. A high priest could enter the temple to make a sacrifice to God once a year. No one else could enter that sacred space. Symbolically, the tearing of the temple curtain

removed the separation between human beings and God. We can approach God at any time and for any reason.

In the title to this message, I asked the question pain or promise? The best answer is both. We have discussed the painful part, but what about the promise? There are several ways to discover the promise.

One is imbedded in the first verse of today's text: When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. Commentators have suggested that the darkness represented the sins that Jesus was absorbing. Thinking about this, two other scriptures came to mind. One is John 1:5: "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it. In a book called the Universal Christ, author Richard Rohr states: "Scientists have discovered that what looks like darkness to the human eye is actually filled with tiny particles called "neutrinos," slivers of light that pass through the entire universe. Apparently there is no such thing as total darkness anywhere, even though the human eye thinks there is. This adds meaning to the statement that Jesus overcomes all darkness; Jesus is the light of the world. Jesus is the transmitter of light into our lives.

Another source of encouragement comes from the ways that God relieved suffering, even prior to Jesus' crucifixion. This morning we heard excerpts from Psalm 22. David opens the psalm with the very words that Jesus used on the cross: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" David was in extreme distress and yet he called upon God. Toward the end of the psalm the tone changes and we hear David say "...he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him... and later, "those who seek him shall praise the Lord." Considering this, it is no accident that Jesus repeated David's words when he was crucified.

The other obvious source of promise is that the crucifixion was not the end. Jesus' death was followed by his resurrection. Then he made his post resurrection appearances to the disciples and we benefit from the stories they recounted. God had a bigger plan and the resurrection has led to the hope and faith of countless people.

A significant post resurrection scripture of which we are all familiar is Romans 8: 35-39, the other text for today. In it we hear the reassuring words that “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor things present, nor things to come...will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” What jumps out at me as I read this once again is that nothing can separate us. And it says neither death nor life. So while we are in this life, there is not a thing we cannot tell Jesus or lift up to him in prayer. We literally cannot be separated as long as we turn to Jesus in faith. What a relief to know that. There is the essence of the promise: no events in this life nor the things that will contribute to our death will keep us from God. This does not mean that we have and will have to go through some pretty tough stuff in this life. I do not mean to gloss over the things that are hard to bear or seem never to end. What I do take Scripture to mean is that we are not ever alone and that God does not give up on us.

There are implications for us as Christians related to how to appropriately respond to this incredible gift. In our recent evening Bible study, we read and studied about fasting. While not everyone will decide to give up meals for a time, fasting can also mean giving up other activities that are important to us in order to gain insight into what we are to do to show our steadfast appreciation for what God has done. My experience at trying this really opened my eyes. I decided to give up some of the time I spend reading the news on my cell phone and to substitute some Bible reading and meditating on what I should be doing to better serve. NOT EASY! I like my morning quiet time drinking coffee and reading the mindless news. I was surprised what a strong habit it had become.

So being a servant either on our own or in a group activity may take more “sacrifice” than we have expected. Yet, there is no shortage of needs within our church and outside in the world that require our attention. Yes, Calvary members do many things to serve; we are a service oriented church family. Here is the challenge I would leave with us all. Are there “comfort zones” which we protect and would find hard to change in order to serve? Maybe you will be confronted with a request or a group decision that is not in keeping with your current thinking or activities. Take a second look and see if the needs outweigh the comfort zone. Jesus did.