

Words from the Cross (week 4):

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"My God, why have you forsaken me?"

Psalm 22:1-11, 22-24, Mark 15:25-34

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<sup>25</sup>It was nine in the morning when they crucified him. <sup>26</sup>The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS.

<sup>27</sup>They crucified two rebels with him, one on his right and one on his left. <sup>[28] [a]</sup> <sup>29</sup>Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, "So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, <sup>30</sup>come down from the cross and save yourself!"<sup>31</sup>In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! <sup>32</sup>Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe." Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

<sup>33</sup>At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. <sup>34</sup>And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?*" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?").<sup>[b]</sup>

[PRAY.]

During Lent our focus has been on Jesus' final words from the cross. So I'm going to begin with a few more light-hearted "last words" from some mostly well-known people.

James W. Rodgers, a convicted murderer, was being escorted to his execution by firing squad in Utah, when he was asked if he had a last request. "Bring me a bullet-proof vest", he replied.

When author David Henry Thoreau was dying, his friends urged him to make his peace with God. "I did not know that we had ever quarreled," he replied.

Friends of W. C. Fields were surprised to find him reading a Bible while he was dying. He explained, "I'm looking for loopholes!"

Reportedly, Sir Winston Churchill's last words were : "I am ready to meet my Maker. Whether my Maker is prepared for the great ordeal of meeting me, is another matter!"

I'm inclined to agree with Woody Allen, who is still living of course, when he said: "I'm not afraid of dying, I just don't want to be there when it happens!"

Each of these weeks during Lent as we have stood at the foot of the cross, listening not only to the last words of Jesus, but observing all that is happening around him, it gets harder and more difficult to remain in this place. The reality of Jesus' suffering and death—or for that matter, the suffering and death of any loved one—is tough to take.

I don't know about you, but I'd like to cover my ears when I hear the insults...shout out about the injustice of it all, or better yet, simply run away. As they say, "D-Nile ain't just a river in Egypt"...**denial** is a God-given coping mechanism. It's a good one. The only problem is that denial only works for awhile. Eventually we must come to grips with reality, however ugly and troubling that reality might be.

So what is real? What is really happening here?

There is drama. Of course all that led up to this moment. But now Mark tells us that at noon the light goes out. The sun refused to shine from noon until 3 p.m. Darkness takes over. Perhaps that shut up those who were mocking and shouting insults? I don't know, but I'd imagine that it got their attention, because darkness at noontime is not normal. Something's up...but what is it?

I don't know about you, but personally I don't much like the dark. We have a joke in our family, that my husband Rob is the "Flashlight King!" For some

unknown reason, every Christmas, my husband gives everyone in the family their own flashlight. Did he forget that he gave us all one just 12 months prior?

Now these are no ordinary flashlights...these are the newest, fanciest, halogen or whatever the latest, greatest, brightest type of flashlight sold on the market today! Maybe HE is afraid of the dark!

Darkness is a potent symbol in the scriptures, but now darkness is real. No flashlights in the ancient world. Torches were likely lit. Hear these words of the OT prophet Amos 8:9-10:

<sup>9</sup>“In that day,” declares the Sovereign LORD,

“I will make the sun go down at noon  
and darken the earth in broad daylight.

<sup>10</sup> I will turn your religious festivals into mourning  
and all your singing into weeping.

I will make all of you wear sackcloth  
and shave your heads.

I will make that time like mourning for an only son  
and the end of it like a bitter day.”

Amos caught a glimpse of Good Friday! The very creation itself is in mourning, for its Creator is dying on the cross. The sun whose light pales in comparison to Jesus the Light of the world, is not just muted. It is as if the plug has been pulled. It is disconnected from its source. Darkness overtakes it, for a time.

Darkness. Darkness obscures our vision. It would be easy to think that God does not work in the dark, but nothing could be further from the truth, as we shall see. So take heart dear friends, when you are in a dark place physically—spiritually—emotionally. You are not alone. God is at work, even in the dark....

But here we are again, at the foot of the cross, resolute. Trying to not run from the wretchedness of the moment...when this time it is Jesus' turn to shout. Mark tells us that Jesus "screamed".

What does he scream? The words are not original with Jesus. No Jew present would misunderstand, for he shouts in Hebrew, the first verse of Psalm 22 which he and all good Jewish children memorized in Sabbath school. In fact, it was a song that was sung to a particular tune "The Doe of the Morning", a melody long lost to human memory:

*"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

That's harsh; hard to hear.

*Did God truly forsake Jesus in his greatest moment of need?*

One can only imagine...No doubt, *Jesus' experience* was one of being forsaken: Tried and found guilty, while completely innocent. Insulted, mocked, spat upon, beaten. Betrayed by Judas, one of his own. Denied by Peter, one of his inner circle. Deserted by the rest of the disciples, save John and a handful of women.

Now this cry from the heart of Jesus, is in fact an honest prayer, an expression of hope:

"My God, my God..."

Jesus prayed, he cried out, summoning God. Notice he does not ask for God to eliminate or end his pain and suffering. Jesus does not ask for deliverance. No. Jesus insists on God's presence, in God's apparent absence.

Jesus cries out in faith and in trust, appealing to God the Father...even as he questions, "why?"

"Why have you forsaken me?" Jesus *feels* utterly, completely alone. Abandoned. Where is God in Jesus' hour of greatest need?

Perhaps you too have felt that way? Surely this experience of Jesus is recorded here not to our horror, but to our edification. For we too have experienced betrayal...felt forsaken, alone, abandoned. Jesus, in his

humanity, knows what it is to feel this desolation of deep despair and loneliness. Just as we know that the sun did not actually stop shining—It's light was obscured, God does not cease to exist just because Jesus –or we – do not sense God's presence. Does Mt. Rainier cease to exist when it is obscured by clouds and not visible? No. Similarly, God is present, even when we are unable to "feel" or sense God's presence. Our feelings are not a reliable barometer of God's presence.

The facts of our faith—and God's promise to never leave us or forsake us—are the bedrock on which we build our faith, not our feelings which can be up and down like a roller coaster! In this aspect, Jesus is also human! He feels desolation deeply, as we do...

Many of life's experiences can take us to such a place: the illness and death of a loved one, a miscarriage, the loss of a job, the death of a marriage through divorce, mental or physical health issues, concern for our children (yes, even adult children), our grandchildren, our parents. Each of us have our own pain that we carry...

Mother Teresa, founder of the Missionaries of Charity, was known for her work among the poorest of the poor in Calcutta, India. As a young nun she had several vivid spiritual experiences of being drawn into the heart of God. These were followed by decades of feeling nothing but abandonment. She wrote in her journal: "In my soul I feel just the terrible pain of loss...of God not being God." In time, her questions about God's existences faded. She began to see this as an invitation to unite with Jesus in his experience on the cross, and with the poor who also feel abandoned. *Her feelings did not mean that she had abandoned God OR that God had abandoned her.* Hers was a radical act of faith based on a relationship she still believed in, even if she did not FEEL God's presence.

Watching the news can lead to despair: to observe from a safe distance the bombing of Syria, the persecution and possible genocide of the Rohingya, a Muslim minority in Myanmar; nearly 1 million of whom have fled for their lives, and now live in refugee camps across the border Bangladesh.

Surely these forsaken ones can identify with Jesus' plea?

We believe in the mystery of the Holy Trinity--One God expressed in three personalities:

God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. This mystery is magnified as we stand at the foot of the cross. In infinite love, God the Father has sent the Son into the world. By identifying with us in taking on human flesh, the Son risks abandonment but also, in coming so close that he bears our sinfulness.

"God the Father, who is complete righteousness and holiness, cannot embrace the sin that the Son so recklessly and lovingly bears. So the Father must abandon the Son on the cross because the Father is both love and righteousness." (p. 45-46, Thank God It's Friday, William H. Willimon).

In other words, there is only one thing that can separate a person from God: sin. But Jesus has no sin. Even Pilate acknowledged that Jesus was innocent. One of the thieves being crucified beside him, agreed, declaring: "This man has done nothing wrong." (Luke 23:41)

On that cross, Jesus bore your sin and mine. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:21, God made him who had no sin, to be sin for us."

"Here in this word from the cross, is the unthinkable: a separation, because of love, in the heart of the fully loving, inseparable Trinity. What a sacrifice the Father is making in the Son's sacrifice, in the sacrificial power of the Spirit." (p. 45-46, Thank God It's Friday, William H. Willimon).

I find myself wanting to skip over this expression of Jesus...it is too raw. Honestly I do not want to go to the place of utter abandonment and desolation. It would be preferable to sanitize this whole death by crucifixion business, eliminate all the pain, suffering, and humiliation, OR at least to quickly gloss over it, to get on with the good news of Easter and the empty tomb.

But that is the whole point of taking time to really listen and internalize Jesus' last words from the cross:

To try as best we can, to wrap our minds around the truth of what is

happening here and about the reality that “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us”.

Are we able to truly grasp this truth? ( that Paul so eloquently expresses in Philippians 2:6-8)

[Christ] who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
7 but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
8 he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.

“In this is love, not that we loved God, but that God loved us, and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.” I John 4:10

What wondrous love is this?

Finally, while we would not rush to Easter morn’s empty tomb, we can look to the whole of Psalm 22 which was on the lips of Jesus. It is a psalm of lament which begins “ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

But as often happens with psalms of lament, they end in praise:

*26...those who seek him shall praise the LORD.  
May your hearts live forever!*

*27 All the ends of the earth shall remember  
and turn to the LORD;  
and all the families of the nations  
shall worship before him.<sup>[1]</sup>*

*28 For dominion belongs to the LORD,  
and he rules over the nations.*

*29 To him,<sup>[1]</sup> indeed, shall all who sleep in<sup>[k]</sup> the earth bow down;  
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,  
and I shall live for him.<sup>[1]</sup>*

<sup>30</sup>*Posterity will serve him;  
future generations will be told about the Lord,  
<sup>31</sup>and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,  
saying that he has done it.*

In the depths of Jesus' despair and forsakenness, we see the heights of God's sacrificial love for you and me. Until we go down into these depths with Jesus, we cannot appreciate the infinite dimensions of God's wondrous love for us.

You and I will never be forsaken, because Jesus went there for us. Even here, there is hope! Thanks be to God! Let us pray....