

*“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*

Where is God?

I composed this meditation while looking up at the cross atop a church steeple that reached into the sky 120 feet above me; and at the same time pondering this image of a lynching in the American South. And attempting to understand the ways we rationalize the meaning of the religious icon, while trying to disassociate ourselves from the reality the photograph represents. But it is so hard to do, because the noose and the cross are the same thing. They both are instruments of torture and death, and terror and coercion.

But how do good human beings let these kinds of arbitrary violence happen? For the Romans who crucified Jesus, it happened because he didn't matter- he wasn't one of them; for the religious leaders who gave him up, it was because he mattered too much- his voice was growing stronger and louder, and more dangerous to them, and disruptive of the status quo. And for those who lynch and beat and defame, it's because the lives of their victims don't matter: they are not like us, they don't belong, they are infidels, they are illegitimate; and what can they do about it anyway?

We are troubled by these instances of cruelty and horror from our past and so many similar brutal events in these present days, and we may ask, “Where is God?” For the perpetrators of such barbarian criminality, God is not present at all; they have shut him out. They are walking where God does not permit; they trespass against morality and the demands of humanity and against the commandments of God. How many commandments have they broken as they torment and kill, even those who claim faith in God? The obvious sixth commandment, but others, as well: these are trials by mob rule, and adjudged by the lies and rumors of prejudice and hateful gossip. It happened in Jerusalem that Good Friday long ago; it happened in Christian America time and again; and it happens still today. So the ninth commandment they break. And even the first and greatest commandment, they break and disavow, because murder is an act that defies God, and they who take life put themselves in God’s place and deny that God is Maker of life, and the Great Unifier of life, who has commanded that we love one another.

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On a Good Friday, as we hear the scripture where Jesus asks where is God, we may be remembering the times we have wondered where God went, the times we have felt forsaken. Is it enough to say, “there is God, hanging from the cross,” believing that takes care of all my hurts and sins and all the problems of the world? On Good Friday, our faith may direct us to that interpretation; but our knowledge of the world and the pain of human existence, make us realize that sometimes God may truly be a child hanging there, choking and turning purple and dying, or a young black man swinging from a tree branch; and that sometimes God may be somewhere in the world among us hurting as we hurt, even if we can’t see him. “Where is God?” It may sound like a word of despair, though it may be for us a word of God’s caring, so that we understand *the cross is always God’s demand to us for justice and compassion*. So what we must never do is forget the pain of the Lord who was crucified, and, as well, the suffering of those who have been hanged

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We are troubled by these instances of cruelty and horror from our past and so many similar brutal events in these present days, and we may ask, “Where is God?” For the perpetrators of such barbarian criminality, God is not present at all; they have shut him out. They are walking where God does not permit; they trespass against morality and the demands of humanity and against the commandments of God. How many commandments have they broken as they torment and kill, even those who claim faith in God? The obvious sixth commandment, but others, as well: these are trials by mob rule, and adjudged by the lies and rumors of prejudice and hateful gossip. It happened in Jerusalem that Good Friday long ago; it happened in Christian America time and again; and it happens still today. So the ninth commandment they break. And even the first and greatest commandment, they break and disavow, because murder is an act that defies God, and they who take life put themselves in God’s place and deny that God is Maker of life, and the Great Unifier of life, who has commanded that we love one another.

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There is a third image I kept in mind as I was writing these words. It comes from a memoir of the concentration camps of World War II, the story of a young boy caught up in a minor crime with older inmates, and killed. Sentenced to the

gallows, where everyone in the camp was forced to watch as he hung between earth and sky, slowly dying. And someone in the crowd moaned, “Where is God?” A word perhaps every prisoner was wondering. Where is God; how could the God of Israel, the God of life, let this happen? The voice spoke again, and this time someone answered him, “Where is God? There he is, hanging, up there.”

On a Good Friday, as we hear the scripture where Jesus asks where is God, we may be remembering the times we have wondered where God went, the times we have felt forsaken. Is it enough to say, “there is God, hanging from the cross,” believing that takes care of all my hurts and sins and all the problems of the world? On Good Friday, our faith may direct us to that interpretation; but our knowledge of the world and the pain of human existence, make us realize that sometimes God may truly be a child hanging there, choking and turning purple and dying, or a young black man swinging from a tree branch; and that sometimes God may be somewhere in the world among us hurting as we hurt, even if we can’t see him. “Where is God?” It may sound like a word of despair, though it may be for us a word of God’s caring, so that we understand *the cross is always God’s demand to us for justice and compassion*. So what we must never do is forget the pain of the Lord who was crucified, and, as well, the suffering of those who have been hanged

or mistreated, because *with them* God is hanging there, too. Everything we confess as believers in Jesus the Messiah who was crucified, comes back to this: his suffering connects him to all who suffer, and only our suffering *with them* makes his suffering become redemption for us.

*“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*

Where is God?

I composed this meditation while looking up at the cross atop a church steeple that reached into the sky 120 feet above me; and at the same time pondering this image of a lynching in the American South. And attempting to understand the ways we rationalize the meaning of the religious icon, while trying to disassociate ourselves from the reality the photograph represents. But it is so hard to do, because the noose and the cross are the same thing. They both are instruments of torture and death, and terror and coercion.

But how do good human beings let these kinds of arbitrary violence happen? For the Romans who crucified Jesus, it happened because he didn't matter- he wasn't one of them; for the religious leaders who gave him up, it was because he mattered too much- his voice was growing stronger and louder, and more dangerous to them, and disruptive of the status quo. And for those who lynch and beat and defame, it's because the lives of their victims don't matter: they are not like us, they don't belong, they are infidels, they are illegitimate; and what can they do about it anyway?

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