

Forsaken

A Sermon Preached by Therese Howell
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
March 4, 2018
Third Sunday of Lent – Year B
Matthew 27:45-56

The 27th chapter of Matthew sends us on a wild ride. It begins with the trial of Jesus. It ends with Jesus' burial. What follows in Chapter 28 is the empty tomb, the resurrection, the Great Commission, and one of the most powerful and comforting phrases in the Bible – "I am with you always, to the end of the age."

And that phrase is appropriate, because the middle of chapter 27 is full of heartbreak, and we will need comforting. The middle of chapter 27 begins with Judas. Remember that Judas has betrayed Jesus, and all of the disciples have deserted Jesus. The disciples have forsaken Jesus.

Judas feels guilty, and remorseful, and tries to confess to the chief priests and to the elders. They forsake Judas.

According to Matthew, they say, "What is that to us? See to it yourself," essentially cursing anyone who betrays an innocent person for money.¹ Judas tosses the thirty pieces of silver to the floor of the temple and leaves - and hangs himself. The priests collect the money, but realize they can't put this into the treasury – it's blood money. So they buy a field, a potter's field – the Field of Blood – where they will bury foreigners.

¹ New Oxford Annotated Bible, Third Edition, Coogan, editor, p52.

Matthew 27 continues with the trial of Jesus – Pilate, the governor, asks Jesus a political question – “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus responds to Pilate, “You say so.” The chief priests and elders then question Jesus, but Jesus doesn’t respond.

Pilate has offered to release a prisoner for the crowd; he asks the crowd if they want him to release Barrabas, or “Jesus who is called the Messiah.” Pilate’s wife is upset – she learns the truth about Jesus’ innocence in a dream and tells Pilate not to have anything to do with Jesus, because he is innocent.² Pilate asks the crowd again, who do they want released? The crowd again and again demands the release of Barrabas, and shouts to crucify Jesus. Pilate realizes he has got a riot going on; Matthew says “Pilate saw that he could do nothing . . . so he washed his hands before the crowd and said, “I am innocent of this man’s blood, see to it yourselves.” Pilate releases Barrabas, flogs Jesus, and then hands Jesus over to be crucified. Pilate forsakes Jesus.

Pilate’s soldiers take Jesus away; they swap his clothes for a scarlet robe, force a crown of thorns on him, spit on him, beat him, and mock him.

The text says “After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.” Respect and human decency have been forsaken.

² Ibid, p52.

Jesus' suffering continues – the soldiers force someone - Simon of Cyrene - to carry Jesus' cross up to Calvary. In an act that might be construed as kindness, the soldiers offer Jesus some wine to drink, mixed with gall, a bitter substance. The wine would dull the pain, but Jesus refuses. The Gospels of Mark and Matthew both report this offering and refusal – it is important to the narrative to show that Jesus accepted the pain of his death fully.³ Kindness has been forsaken.

Matthew 27:33 calmly states, “And when they had crucified him. . .” - a matter of fact recitation about putting the Son of God on a cross to die an awful death. The soldiers divide up Jesus' clothes, sit down, and watch him die. They hang a sign over his head, “This is Jesus, King of the Jews.” That was the charge against him – treason against Roman rule.⁴ Forsaken by the government.

Matthew tells us the crowd crucified two criminals along with Jesus. While hanging on the cross, Jesus is mocked and ridiculed. The crowd urges him to prove that he is the Son of God... “save yourself,” “come down from the cross,” let God deliver him now.” Even the two criminals mock Jesus. Everyone has forsaken him.

Up to this point, Matthew has been succinct, matter-of-fact. But now Matthew gets specific: “From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.” According to Matthew, Jesus cries out in Aramaic: “Eli, Eli, lema sabbachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” This phrase is a direct quote from Psalm 22, verse 1.

³ Ibid, p53.

⁴ Ibid, p53.

My study Bible says Psalm 22 is a Prayer of a person abandoned by God, an individual lament.⁵ So, Divine abandonment?

Some of the people watching heard Jesus, and they think he is calling for Elijah. Someone gets a stick, puts a wine-soaked sponge on it, and tries to give it to Jesus to drink. But the others stop this – they want to see if Elijah will come and save Jesus! But Jesus cries out again – Matthew doesn't tell us what Jesus cries out this time – and then calmly states, "... (he) breathed his last." Forsaken by God.

Jesus, the Son of God accepts his death penalty, and is executed as a common criminal. Jesus, the Son of Man, identifies with every person who has ever felt God's absence at the moment of deepest need. He dies in agony, alone. Forsaken by God.⁶

But *was* Jesus forsaken by God? Matthew says that suddenly, the curtain in front of the temple is ripped in half, the earth shakes, and "rocks were split." And it doesn't stop there – "the tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised." That doesn't sound like God has forsaken Jesus, does it?

Verse 53, calmly states, "After his resurrection they came out of the holy city and appeared to many." What?? Others were resurrected, too? The centurion, and the others with him saw the earth quake, the rocks split apart, the saints rise - and they were terrified.

⁵ Ibid, p793 (Hebrew Bible)

⁶ Judith Jones, www.workingpreacher.org, April 9, 2017

At this point I want to say, yeah, something bad has happened to someone else, if you can consider being terrified as bad. Probably not in this context. But the centurion and the others now believe that Jesus is the Son of God. It just took death, an earthquake, rocks splitting, and the dead rising.

The text for today finishes with this statement: “Many women were there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.” The disciples – the men – had forsaken Jesus, but the women had not. These women traveled from Galilee! And they ministered to and served Jesus. And most importantly, they did not forsake Jesus.

Forsaken. Dictionary.com defines this as “to quit or leave entirely; abandon; desert; or to give up or renounce (like a habit, or way of life).

Forsaken.

We are the season of Lent, the time of preparation for the resurrection of Jesus. Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent.

This year, Ash Wednesday fell on February 14. On this Ash Wednesday, a young man, 19 years old, walked into the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland Florida, and opened fire with a semi-automatic weapon.

Anderson Cooper, reporting live that evening, stated that "...Parkland is the newest point on a tear-stained map."⁷ Cooper went on to name others on that tear-stained map: Las Vegas, Sutherland Springs, Charleston, Columbine, Oak Creek, New Town. In that same report, Cooper describes Parkland as "a town of vigils... drawing thousands together... in Parkland tonight, there are points of light shining in the darkness."⁸

Before the gunman was captured, he killed 17 people, ranging in age from 14 to 49. He injured 14 more. He killed three adults, and 14 young people; he traumatized more people than I want to count. Did God forsake them?

The Holocaust. Genocide in too many countries to name. Senseless shootings. Senseless *school* shootings. Terrorist bombings. Hunger. Poverty. Disease. Death on a cross. Has God forsaken us?

No, God is right here, in the witness of Scripture, in the stories of faith.

What is in this story of faith, according to Melinda Quivick, "is a proclamation of faith. From it, we receive the face of God in the midst of desolation. It is a face of resignation and deep comprehension."⁹

Human beings are sinners; thankfully, sinners saved by grace. Quivick goes on to say, "The failings of the people who create this abomination -- and that of all victimization in human history -- is known intimately by God. ... God knows the

⁷ CNN.com, Anderson Cooper reporting 2/14/2018, 8pm, on the Parkland, FL school shooting.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Melinda Quivick, www.workingpreacher.org, April 13, 2014

pain of victims. Those who suffer without rescuers, those who are tormented and never defended, those who are counted as nothing, those who are mocked and tortured -- all these are the ones whose lives Jesus takes on himself in this great story of faith.”¹⁰

Jesus saves others by not saving himself.¹¹ God has not forsaken Jesus. God has not forsaken us.

So God was right there, God is right here, doing what God does best: suffering, sacrificing, bearing all that cannot be borne. To all who ask, out of unimaginable pain, if God has forsaken us, the answer of faith is that God is doing what God does best: suffering. Because God suffers, because God bleeds and dies, God also rises, in the resurrection of his Son.¹²

Humanity has done its worst, but what humans intended for evil, God intended for good, echoing another story (Genesis 50:20).

The way of the cross is none other than the way of life and peace.¹³

Spoiler alert - The story is not over. We are not forsaken. “I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Amen.

¹⁰ Melinda Quivick, www.workingpreacher.org, April 13, 2014

¹¹ Judith Jones, www.workingpreacher.org, April 9, 2017

¹² Thanks to Alyson Janke, sermon to the Wild Rose Presbyterian Church, Wild Rose, Wisconsin, Palm Sunday

¹³ Judith Jones, www.workingpreacher.org, April 9, 2017

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