
The Fourth Word from the Cross

“Forsaken”

Mark 15:33-39

The Fourth Sunday in Lent – March 6, 2005
Northway Christian Church, Dallas, Texas

Dr. Douglas B. Skinner

The Germans call them “*earworms*.” The scientists who have researched them prefer the name “*brain itches*.” Whatever you call them, they’re those songs that get stuck in our heads for days at a time. Dr. James Kellaris of the University of Cincinnati explains that “*certain songs have properties that are analogous to histamines that make our brain itch and the only way to scratch a cognitive itch is to repeat the offending melody in our minds*.” And that explains the week you spent with “*Dead Skunk in the Middle of the Road*” in 1974, and that semester in middle school when you couldn’t shake “*Yummy, Yummy, Yummy I Got Love in My Tummy*.” And just as this is true for tunes, I find that for me it’s equally true for texts.

I’ve had a text in my head since 1965; that’s forty years now. It got put there when I was just a little boy going to church during Holy Week. You see, in the Episcopal tradition, between Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday there is a worship service scheduled for every single day. And at those services you get the longest Scripture readings of the liturgical year. On Palm Sunday you get the full story of Christ’s crucifixion from the Gospel of Matthew. On Monday and Tuesday it’s that same story from the Gospel of Mark. On Wednesday and Thursday it’s the story of the crucifixion from the Gospel of Luke that gets read. And on Friday it’s the story of the crucifixion from the Gospel of John. In six days you hear five full chapters of the New Testament read in church; that’s 282 verses. Compare that to the seven verses that were read here this morning and you get a sense of the scale of the spiritual exercise.

Growing up, my mother made sure that I was in church for all of those services each year. And listening to that annual marathon of the Biblical witness about Christ’s crucifixion from all four Gospels was my introduction to the critical study of Scripture. Hearing what Matthew, Mark, Luke and John said about the day that Christ died in such rapid sequence made me acutely aware of two things: (1) that all four Gospels narrate the same basic event, and (2) that all four Gospels differ in their details.

Barbara Brown Taylor calls the agreements between the four Gospel accounts of Christ’s crucifixion “*the bones of the story*.”

- *Jesus died on a cross at a place called Golgotha;*
- *He was hung up between two other men;*
- *He had a sign above his head that read “King of the Jews”;*

- *The charge was treason against the Empire;*
- *The method of execution was Roman;*
- *People were so sure that he was not coming down that they divided up his clothes;*
- *He was offered some sour wine before he died;*
- *And he died just before sundown on the day before the Sabbath.*

That's substantial agreement. But there are important differences in the details.

For instance, this Lent here at Northway we've been looking at "*the seven last words of Christ*" in sermons on Sunday mornings. This is a devotional practice that goes back at least as far as the 12th century in the church. We think that it began as a spiritual exercise among the followers of St. Francis of Assisi. They were an order of preachers who sought ways to make the Gospel more accessible to ordinary people, and talking about the seven last words of Christ from the cross was one of those memorable ways that they developed to help people grasp the significance of the Gospel. But when you go to the Gospels to find the seven last words, you won't find them in any one Gospel.

Luke reports three things Christ said from the cross - the word of Forgiveness: "*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do*"; the word of welcome to the good thief: "*Today you will be with me in Paradise*"; and the word of commitment: "*Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit.*" The Gospel of John reports three others words – the word of affection: "*Mother, behold your son*"; the word of agony: "*I thirst*"; and the word of triumph: "*It is finished.*" And Matthew and Mark both report just one word spoken from the cross, the cry of dereliction: "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.*"

During Holy Week at the Church of the Holy Apostles, we heard Matthew and Mark's accounts of the crucifixion over three consecutive days – on Palm Sunday, the Monday before Easter and the Tuesday before Easter. Maybe it was because they came first; maybe it was because our priest had a dramatic voice that echoed in that cinderblock sanctuary; maybe it was because in the middle of the reading there was a strange foreign phrase; but whatever it was, "*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani*" got planted in my brain when I was just a kid, and it's been an itch that I can't quite seem to scratch ever since.

According to the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, the world grew dark on Good Friday about noon, and remained so for three hours. And then at about three o'clock in the afternoon, in the veil of that darkness, Christ was heard crying out from the cross in a loud voice, "*Eli, Eli, lams sabachthani,*" Aramaic for "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.*" In Christian tradition this is the middle word from the cross, and the most mysterious.

It's said that Martin Luther, the Protestant Reformer, sat contemplating these words for hour upon hour. Refusing to eat or drink, they say he sat at his desk with his Bible open to these words, lost in deep contemplation. And when he finally stirred, he was heard muttering to himself, "*God forsaking God? Who can understand it!*" And that pretty much summarizes the church's struggle with these words. They are at the very heart of what Christ was doing on the cross, and they are among the more baffling things that Christ ever said.

Some interpreters try to leap frog over them by using “*completion strategies*.” A “*completion strategy*” is what the researchers say we need to use to get rid of an ear worm or a brain itch. To illustrate what this means they like to talk about Mozart. It seems his children would “*infuriate*” him by banging out partial melodies and incomplete scales on the piano below the room where he composed. And it would bother him so much that he would have to run down stairs to complete the scales and finish the tunes. He couldn’t stand an unresolved musical scale or score, and there are Bible interpreters who can’t stand an unresolved text. And so “*completion strategies*” are common among the popular interpretations of why Christ said “*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani*” from the cross.

- The first one is to link the fourth word from the cross with the first verse of Psalm 22. In Christian circles Psalm 22 is known as the Passion Psalm. It has been described as a veritable portrait of the crucifixion. And in fact it begins with the same words that Christ spoke from the cross according to Matthew and Mark, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.*” According to this completion strategy, the reason why Christ spoke these words was to draw tight the connection between a prophecy and its fulfillment. They also like to suggest that in first century Jewish circles that when the opening verse of a Psalm got cited that the whole Psalm was referenced. And they like to point out that while Psalm 22 begins in the misery of an apparent crucifixion that it ends with a celebration of deliverance and triumph. This completion strategy views the cry of dereliction as Christ just reading from a prearranged script that winds up in victory.
- Other interpreters argue that instead of bogging down with this mysterious word from the cross that instead we should focus on the more triumphant words that Christ spoke before He died: John’s “*It is finished!*” and Luke’s “*Father, into your hands I commit My spirit.*” The idea here is to accentuate what’s clear and positive; to emphasize the last things that Christ said rather than to get weighed down by the mysterious thing He said in the hours of darkness.
- And the third completion strategy that some interpreters use to get around Christ’s confusing confession of God-forsakenness is to brush by Good Friday with hardly a glance in our rush from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday. We’ll have more than 500 people in church on Palm Sunday. We’ll have close to 1,000 people in church on Easter Sunday. But we’ll be lucky to see 200 people here on Good Friday. If attendance says anything about what we value spiritually, then the triumphal entry and the empty tomb matter more to us than what Jesus did and said on the cross. Clearly they’re happier days, and not nearly as troubling.

Now, there’s a spiritual bias at work in these completion strategies that we need to recognize. Stanley Lindquist, a professor of psychology at California

State University at Fresno, has called it “*dishonesty on cloud nine.*” It’s the idea that Christianity is the “*bubbling function*” of life. It’s the impression that being a Christian means that we think we get to live lives that are free from trouble and despair. Trust Christ it says and you’ll never know defeat, disappointment or discouragement. And the reason why some people want to get around or over Christ’s cry of dereliction from the cross, “*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani,*” is because it shatters this mistaken expectation. If Christ faced darkness and felt abandoned then we can’t harbor the illusion that we won’t either. If we allow ourselves to wrestle with the fourth word from the cross, then we open ourselves to facing reality. If Christ felt God-forsaken, then it’s likely that at times we will too, and that’s a thought that’s more than some folks can bear. But I really think we need to as people of faith. You see, I think Christ said it, and that He meant it. “*My God, my God why have you forsaken me.*” And because He did, then we’ve got to struggle with it.

I believe that the fourth word from the cross is theologically true. There’s hardly a Sunday morning around here that you won’t hear in the hymns we sing, the words we say and the prayers we pray that Jesus Christ died for our sins. That’s a shorthand way, drawn from the Scriptures, of talking about what Jesus Christ was doing on the cross. That sacrifice was atoning, which is to say that on Calvary God in Christ was dealing with the reality and penalty of our sins. And one way that the New Testament talks about this is to say that Jesus Christ went to the cross to take the punishment that we deserve. This is what Peter meant when he wrote in his first letter, “*Christ Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross*” (2:24) and what Paul meant when he explained in his second letter to the Corinthians, “*For our sake God made Christ to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Christ we might become the righteousness of God*” (5:21). I’m convinced that spiritually this is part of what prompted Christ to cry out from Calvary “*Eli, Eli, lama Sabachthani.*” But there is more than just a doctrinal truth at stake here.

As theologically true as I believe that Christ’s cry of dereliction from the cross is, I’m even more convinced of its existential truth. You see, in those three hours of silence from noon to three on Good Friday, Christ experienced the absence and silence of God. Biblical theologians call this “*Deus Absconditus*” - “*the God who has absconded,*” and they have a name for it because it’s just that common in the Biblical tradition. Absent and silent is how the Biblical God sometimes is. I wish that I could explain it. And I wish that it weren’t his way. But sometimes God is so present in our lives that we can almost reach out and touch Him. But there are other times when God is so absent that you can wind up questioning if He really is there, or ever has been. And this is where Jesus Christ was from noon to three on Good Friday. He was in the darkness that we know all too well. We’ve all faced that “*non-answering silence*” (Wolterstorff). We know both its frustration and fear.

And just as there is real encouragement in knowing that Jesus Christ went through it too, so there is real empowerment in following Christ’s example in the experience of it. Here’s the remarkable thing that we must keep in view about all of this, in the deep darkness of feeling God-forsaken Jesus prayed; He still talked

to *“my God.”* He felt abandoned. He felt alone. But he kept on talking to the God who was absent and quiet for whatever reason at that particular moment.

In a collection of sermons he had preached, the late Lewis Smedes talked about a time of deep darkness in his life. He was spending some time alone in a cabin on an island in Puget Sound, *“consulting with his soul.”* And on the Wednesday afternoon of the second week at about 4 in the afternoon, Lewis says his world became dark. Friends, hearing about what happened, described it later Lewis suffering “an acute anxiety attack.” But Lewis, ever the Biblical Christian, says that what happened to him was what Psalm 139:8&10 describes – *“If I make my bed in Sheol... even there... thy right hand shall hold me.”* Lewis said that on that Indian Summer afternoon he *“fell into a mini-hell and landed in the hands of the living God.”* And what he experienced *“was the saving presence of a loving God who put his hands underneath him when he was dangling, dry, hung-out in nothingness where no human hand was able to reach out and hold him up.”* He called it *“the gift of being held.”* And what it means is not that we will avoid the experience of feeling God-forsaken, but that we will never know its reality.

There will be days of darkness for us and times when it feels like God is absent and silent. But even in that hell, *“contrary to rumor and against all the odds... God will be there... putting his love beneath us and holding us up”* (Smedes 143). And so when it grows dark and we’re feeling forsaken, we can still pray, *“My God, my God,”* and know that it’s true.

Sources

- Lindquist, Stanley E. *“Dishonesty On Cloud Nine.”* Christianity Today. 5/23/75.
 Massie, Daniel W. *“Puzzling Cross Words IV: God Forsaken.”* First Presbyterian Church. Charleston, South Carolina. 3/30/03.
 Radcliffe, Timothy. *“Seven Last Words.”* www.thetablet.co.
 Smedes, Lewis. How Can it Be All Right When Everything is all Wrong. HarperSanFrancisco. 1982.
 Taylor, Barbara Brown. *“My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?”* Calvary Episcopal Church, Memphis. 4/21/00.
 Vander Zee, Leonard J. *“Palm/Passion Sunday.”* South Bend Christian Reformed Church. 3/8/01.