



The Last Words of Jesus: Anguish

A Sermon by Rev. Saranell K. Hartman
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“From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. 46 And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" 47 When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah." 48 At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. 49 But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." 50 Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.” *Matthew 27: 45- 50*

As Jesus slowly sags down, with more weight on the nails in the wrists. Excruciating, fiery pain shoot along the finger and up the arms to explode in the brain. As He pushes Himself upward to avoid this stretching torment, He places His full weight on the nail through his feet. Again there is searing agony as the nails tear through the nerves. As the arms fatigue, great waves of cramps sweep over the muscles, knotting them in deep relentless, throbbing pain.

Jesus fights to raise Himself, in order to get even one short breath.

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

To the thief dying at His side: “Today thou shalt be with Me in Paradise.”

To his mother and his closest friend: “Woman, behold thy son.” “Behold thy mother.”

In the words of the psalmist foretelling the death of Messiah,

He cries: **“My God why hast Thou forsaken Me?”** (*North Umbria Prayer Book*)

“Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani”

Jesus is nearing the end. Darkness is over all the land. Jesus is at his lowest point. Some friends have gathered around him- but others still completely misunderstand him. They mistake Jesus cry as a plea to Elijah to come and to rescue him. The folklore of the day suggests that Elijah was the ‘patron saint of lost causes.’

(Matthew: A Commentary, Volume 2: The Churchbook, Frederick Dale Bruner, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2007.

Jesus is not calling Elijah-- but is calling out to God in anguish and distress. “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani” Matthew records this question in Aramaic-- the only words of Jesus recorded this way-- as if to say these are sacred, mysterious.

Karl Barth, twentieth century Swiss theologian writes, ‘The meaning of the incarnation is plainly revealed in the question Jesus on the cross: “My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me?”

Jesus knows the human experience of questioning God, of wondering why God has apparently abandoned us. Wondering why God won't come to our aid and rescue.

The only time I ever remember hearing this text preached on was during a funeral for a junior high boy. My husband Tim, then a new pastor, had just become Andrew's youth pastor. We were all stunned by his death; to this day we don't really know if he meant to take his life or if it was an accident. We did know that it should not have happened but it did. When the sermon began I was stunned by the choice of text. Wouldn't something more comforting, sweet and gentle have been more appropriate?! Yet this cry was just what many of his friends but most especially his parent's were feeling. "My God, My God!" There was nothing soft or gentle that could ease the sharp pain of these grieving parents.

When tragedy, pain or hardship strikes the questions come. Like Jesus we may question God's absence. We may question God's care or concern for us. To call for help and not receive it, to not feel God's presence at our lowest, most devastated moment--this is the human experience that finds meaning in Jesus.

"God suffers not as a mere matter of empathy--but as one who takes the suffering of the whole world into his being." (Bruce McCormick, lecture, Princeton Seminary)

Up until this point, Jesus, the God human, has been without sin. But when Jesus takes sin upon himself, the Holy Spirit who has been Jesus' guide departs from the human consciousness of Jesus. When God's presence goes the light goes out. Surrounded by outward darkness Jesus feels inner darkness as well. My God-- not my father, but my God--why have you abandoned me?

Jesus is dying a death in "God abandonment". This is the completion of the surrender that began in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus is drinking his cup to the dregs. Jesus will suffer his passion and death without the sustaining power and comfort of the Holy Spirit.

In taking on the sin of the world, Jesus took within himself—and thus into God's experience—abandonment--rejection. The separation from God that was Adam and Eve's in the Garden of Eden is now God's experience. Jesus' death in "God abandonment" breaks the curse. The human experience of God's rejection is taken into God's self. The separation that is ours is no longer! Because of this moment we are brought close. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (1 Corinthians 5:21)

Jesus dies a death in God abandonment: a moment that will never need to be repeated!

Jesus' last words before death as recorded by Mark and Matthew teach us the gospel within the Gospel. They tell us that Jesus took on our abandonment, our questions, our feelings of God's betrayal, our most agonizing experiences and still believed in the God he could not feel and was surely tempted to disbelieve." (Dale Brunner)

Mother Teresa, known world wide for loving the poorest of the poor and called a saint, knew what it was like to believe in a God she could not feel. Ten years after her death, letters she wrote to her spiritual advisor were published. In them she admits to experiencing "God abandonment". She writes, "Jesus has a very special love for you... (But) as for me the silence and the emptiness is so great, that I look down and do not see, listen and do not hear. The tongue moves in prayer but does not speak... I want you to pray for me--that I let him have a free hand...Please pray for me especially that I may not spoil His work and that Our Lord may

show Himself--for there is such terrible darkness within me, as if everything was dead.. It has been more or less from the time I started 'the work'." (from a 1953 letter)

Three years later she writes "Such deep longing for God--and repulsed--empty...pray for me please that I keep smiling at Him in spite of everything." (1956)

"This is the way Mother Teresa learned to deal with her trial of faith: by converting her feeling of abandonment by God into an act of abandonment to God. It would be her Gethsemane, she came to believe, and her participation in the thirst Jesus suffered on the Cross. And it gave her access to the deepest poverty of the modern world: The poverty of meaninglessness and loneliness. To endure this trial of faith would be to bear witness to the fidelity for which the world is starving. 'Keep smiling,' Mother Teresa used to tell her community and guests, and somehow, coming from her, it doesn't seem trite. For when she kept smiling during her night of faith, it was not a cover up but a manifestation of her loving resolve to be 'an apostle of joy.'" (Carol Zaleski "The Dark Night of Mother Teresa" in *First Things*, May 2003)

In her own words: "Suffering is nothing by itself. But suffering shared with the passion of Christ is a wonderful gift, the most beautiful gift, a token of love."

From Jesus' last words before death we can know with confidence that God not only identifies with us in our dark nights where we are quite sure that God has left us to fend for ourselves, but also because Jesus died a death in God abandonment, we will never be separated from God.

As the apostle Paul writes, "For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, not height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39)

The light shines in darkness and the darkness will not overcome it!

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