

A Rabbi Speaks at Good Friday Services

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This is a unique moment, an historic moment, a moment to remember.

For one of the first times in history, perhaps the first time, a rabbi has been asked to speak during a Good Friday service. True enough, there have often been occasions when a rabbi has spoken at Sunday church services, and true enough, there have often been times when a minister or priest has spoken at Sabbath Synagogue services. But I have searched my own records and have spoken to several historians of religion, and it appears that, indeed, today is an extraordinary milestone in the long, complicated history of relations between Christianity and Judaism. Today is a remarkable occasion in the annals of our two ancient peoples of God.

This exceptional, singular moment is the direct result of Dr. Maurice Boyd's generosity of spirit, something that he, as minister of this church, exhibits in overflowing abundance. Maurice Boyd's willingness to push trust, commitment, and leadership to new levels is something I shall never forget, and it is something I shall always cherish.

I am profoundly grateful to Maurice Boyd for seizing this opportunity to expand the frontiers of faith, and to build human bridges of mutual respect and understanding between Jews and Christians. His invitation to speak at Good Friday services was offered in his omnipresent spirit of joy combined with his deep spiritual moorings. To open one's pulpit to a guest from another religious tradition on such a solemn day speaks volumes about Maurice Boyd, master preacher and spiritual risk taker.

But what makes this such an exceptional moment? Let me count the ways. For Christians, these hours commemorating the death long ago in Jerusalem of a thirty-three-year-old Jewish man, represent a period of intense introspection, a mystical leap across nearly twenty centuries to another time, another place; these hours of Good Friday have the potential to stir Christians to their core as women and men of faith. Good Friday forces Christians to ask: who was, who is Jesus? What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? Who, what, why, where is God?

For Christians, the stirring music, the potent liturgy of meditations, the unusual time of the worship service all combine to shake one's complacency, and for Christians, Good Friday in its compelling power forms a mystical bridge between earth and heaven, between life and death, between past and future. Clearly, for Christians, Good Friday can inspire and enrich human lives.

But there is another far different side to Good Friday. It is a history, a record of shame I am compelled to describe not as a means of obtaining cheap grace from you or to induce a sense of guilt among you. That would be trivializing our profound, albeit different religious commitments.

But if I omitted this other side of Good Friday, I would be unfaithful to my calling as a rabbi, as a Jewish teacher. I tell this other story of Good Friday because I have learned from many Christians that Good Friday is a day to face truth as on no other day of the year.

And I share this aspect of Good Friday with you because of a simple but powerful Jewish imperative. Once, the story goes, a beloved rabbi was nearing death. Gathered

around the dying rabbi are many of his disciples, his students.

They cry in unison as they proclaim their great love for their spiritual leader, but the rabbi musters his last bit of strength and tells his students, "You have constantly professed your love for me, but not once, not once have you ever asked what hurts me. If you do not know what hurts me, what causes me pain, how can you truly love me?"

So, too, Jews for centuries have been told how much Christians love them, but rarely, have Jews been asked by Christians, "What hurts you?" And so on this Christian holy day of the spirit, I will tell you what hurts us and why the verse from Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" is so much a part of the Jewish experience.

Today I feel the thirty-five centuries, the 3,500 years of Jewish history, present in this sanctuary. I acutely feel the presence of my spiritual and physical ancestors at this moment. Their faces are pressed against the windows of this church. Their voices of earnest prayer resonate within me. Their songs of longing for God echo in my head. I am comforted by this link with those Jews who have lived before me. They are with me today as I am with them.

Their presence within my heart and head demand that I speak now of other Good Fridays, in other times and in other places. For this day, these very hours, was a time of terrible dread for many Jews, for my own grandparents who left their ancient homes in eastern Europe to escape persecution, and who came as youngsters to this land, to Pennsylvania, a place founded by William Penn, a peaceful nonviolent man, a Quaker.

Their poignant painful personal stories of past Good Fridays are permanent parts of my own memory bank, stories that have a tragic predictability. As a child, my grandparents told me how Christians in their native villages would each year rush from their churches at the conclusion of Good Friday services in countless towns, cities, and villages in Europe...rushing as an angry mob intent to do harm, to rape, and to murder their Jewish neighbors. Somehow Good Friday provided an annual religious mandate for open hunting season on Jews.

"Christ killers!" they called out. "Yids! Kikes! You have killed our Lord and you must die!" these mobs would shout in a variety of languages, but whatever language the murderous Good Friday mobs used, their intent was always lethal. My grandparents, like millions of other Jews throughout history who witnessed these Good Friday pogroms, were at first frightened by the violent language and action of their Christian neighbors who had just concluded worship services that commemorated the death of a single Jew in Jerusalem.

And when they somehow, perhaps miraculously, survived the anti-Jewish assaults, my grandparents were bewildered by the Christian religion, one that proudly proclaimed universal love and peace, but also a religion that could provoke a murderous reaction among its adherents.

And finally, my grandparents became angry at the mob, and furious at the Christian preachers and teachers who annually spewed toxic hatred of Jews and Judaism from sacred houses of worship, particularly on Good Friday. My grandparents, when confronted with the murder of their families, the pillage of their communities of faith, turned in deep despair to the one place where anguished Jews have always turned when seeking solace and purpose to their suffering. They turned in hope to the Bible. And they cried out the words from the Book of Psalms, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?"

My grandparents were probably unaware of the painful irony involved. They recited precisely the same words that another Jew, Jesus, in an earlier time, had also recited in his despair. Jews like my grandparents were faithful to their God, but they were trapped in bloody, violent eastern Europe, and they had their faith tested every Good Friday. If, as they and I believe, the Jewish covenant with God is irrevocable, that is forever and ever, why then does that same God test us so?

Why the utter pain of belief? Where is God? Has the God of Israel truly abandoned the people of Israel? It is a question Jesus, the Jew, asked on the Roman cross...it is the same question Rabbi Akiba asked some years later when he too was executed by the Roman army of occupation. It is the same question that every faithful child of Israel has asked through the centuries when faced with cruelty, violence, and destruction.

Jews have asked it so often; hanging on a cross 2,000 years ago in the Holy City of Jerusalem, being burned alive 500 years ago in the main plazas of Spanish cities with sunny sounding names like Toledo and Grenada during the Inquisition because of their religious faith, being gassed fifty years ago during the Holocaust in death camps with harsh sounding names like Auschwitz and Treblinka.

Let me put the matter as badly as I can: Christians perceive Jesus on the cross crying, "My God, my God why have You forsaken me?" as a moment of divine intervention into human history; a once and for all event with cosmic meaning for the human family.

Not surprisingly, Jews using a different prism of faith and history, see Jesus on the cross in another, much more familiar way...as yet another Jewish victim. Jesus was not the first and certainly he was not the last Jew who, when facing intense pain and suffering, cried out the words from Psalms.

Where else would a Jew turn at such a moment but to the Bible, especially to the Book of Psalms? And so Jesus did. And although the Christian theological beliefs about the divinity and the messiahship of Jesus are not ours, still the Jewish people clearly understand the cry from the heart of a dying kinsman, a dying Jew on the occupiers' cross.

Millions of Jews like Jesus have spoken the words of Psalms because they believed that even in the face of death, even as the poison gas of the Nazi death camps entered the lungs of the Holocaust victims, even then, or perhaps I should say, *especially* then, did Jews expect God to respond, however faintly, to their cries and whispers for help.

If one doesn't believe in a God who hears prayer, if one doesn't believe in a God of history, a God who intervenes in human history, if one doesn't believe in a God who has established a covenant with the Jewish people, if one does not share these beliefs then the cry "My God, my God, why has Thou forsaken me?" has no meaning.

For if there is no God, then it is fruitless and hopelessly naive to ask why a nonexistent God has forsaken us. God was never there to begin with. Such a belief expects nothing from a God who does not exist in covenant with us.

But if, but if we believe, even if only on certain days of the year, Good Friday and Easter for Christians, and Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Passover for Jews, that there is a God who cares about us, hears us, and shapes us...then the psalm makes sense and gives us strength.

The demand that God not forsake us is the highest, the ultimate form of *hutzpah*, that delicious Hebrew word meaning "cheek," "gall" or "nerve." We expect more from God because we are in covenant with our Creator. We may be wretches, as the great

song of faith, *Amazing Grace*, describes us, but we wretches still have the gall, the *hutzpah*, to demand that God not abandon us in our agony, in our sorrows, in our pain. We expect more from God than we expect from an idol, or from magic stones, or from the sun, moon, sea, or fire.

To even ask the question is for Jews an act of supreme faith. To even suppose that God is somehow involved with us is a profound spiritual commitment. Think about it for a moment.

A Jewish carpenter's son, only thirty-three-years-old, asked the question of God centuries ago in Jerusalem. Jews throughout history, including my own grandparents, asked the same question of God when confronted with anti-Jewish attacks. And we are told by Holocaust survivors that some Jews, as they faced certain death from the Nazis, asked aloud if God had forsaken them using these same familiar words from Psalms.

For Christians who today are trapped on their own personal crosses of pain and suffering, of addictions, of loveless lives, of bitter existences, to even utter the words of the psalmist is the first step towards spiritual liberation. Because by demanding that God not forsake us, we open ourselves up to the Divine Presence.

And for Jews who this week celebrate a physical Exodus from ancient slavery in Egypt, for Jews who are trapped in their own personal Egypts of spiritual loneliness, of alienation from the God of Israel, to even ask the question is the first step to spiritual freedom.

We ask if God has forsaken us only when our umbrella has broken in a thunderstorm, only when we are at our own breaking point, only when we face terrible odds, then we rally ourselves and cry out and say, "O my God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" We cry out because we are someone, we matter because we are God's creations.

We will not let God turn away from us. Everyday of our lives we will raise our voices and demand that God respond to us. We will pursue God all the days of our lives because God and ourselves are inextricably linked. We could not escape from God, even at the gas chambers of Auschwitz, and we can not escape from God now. And God can not escape from us.

This is our eternal human condition: forever seeking God and God forever seeking us. It is a messy and painful way to conduct our lives, but it is the only way we have as humans and perhaps, just perhaps, it is the only way that God has as well.

So on this special day of Good Friday, I urge you, as Christians, to probe the depths of your being and shout with the psalmist, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?"

My people, the Jews, have been forced to say these words of supplication for centuries, and despite all that has happened to us as a people, yes, despite Auschwitz, we still recite it, we still demand that God respond to our pleas. To ask that of God marks the first step towards spiritual redemption; and to not ask it of God is to surrender our claim to the Divine Presence.

So let us in faith say together those powerful and painful words that have echoed through centuries and centuries of human agony: "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" and now let us say AMEN!