

Palm Sunday

Matthew 27:39-50

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Here we are again, gathered as one body yet not in one place, separated by physical distance but still woven together in the power of the Spirit—the church, the body of Christ, doing what we can for the healing of the world. I am thankful for you—to just know you are out there—and I hope that during this time of worship you might pause from time to time to realize that people are joining in this time of worship from coast to coast, even from different places around the world.

So even if you are sitting in front of your computer or iPad by yourself, you are not alone. You are joined by friends and strangers alike, all of us searching for God’s presence in our days, all of us trying to make some meaning or sense out of our current experience, all of us waiting for the season of recovery and healing to begin.

Even in our waiting, God is at work. We might not always see it or feel it, but God is knitting together new ways of being church and community even now. That is what God does. It is who God is. Yet the promise that new possibilities always emerge from seasons of suffering and struggle does not and cannot deny the suffering and struggle that occur. This is why we must now move from a Palm Sunday focus, a moment of celebration, into the Passion story, a story that reminds us Jesus emptied himself out, all out, for us and for this world, fully plunging into suffering and struggle.

Our scripture today is a text—whose context is the time of Jesus’ crucifixion—usually read at our Maundy Thursday Tenebrae service or during a Good Friday service. But we are reading it today because it contains our next question that Jesus asks.

I almost changed the selection of the text. I came very close to deciding to scrap my original plan of focusing on this passage about Jesus’ death to instead focus on a different passage, one that did not contain such pathos and torment. “Don’t we have enough of that right now?” I asked myself, “Enough suffering, enough pain, enough grief, enough death?” It did not help that I had been checking in on clergy colleagues in New York only to find out that the memorial services are starting to pile up for them, that some of them have COVID-19 themselves, and that all of them are tired and rather overwhelmed. “Get ready,” one of them told me out of genuine concern. Get ready.

Honestly, though, how does one “get ready” for a prolonged season of suffering, pain, grief, and death? You can’t. You can only face it when it comes, relying on the promise of our faith that there is a better day on the horizon. The promise of our faith is that God is not done yet. And that truth, that promise, is why I chose to stick with the original plan to preach this text from Matthew—the one that contains Jesus’ last question in his earthly life, the stark and bracingly honest question “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” This is the question Jesus painstakingly posed right before he breathed his last, according to both Matthew and Mark.

Martin Copenhaver points out that it only seems fitting for Jesus to have a question on his lips as he approaches death. Jesus asked 307 different questions throughout his

ministry. Yet this one is different from all the others we've heard. This last question is not meant to teach, like the question of compassion: "Do you see this woman?" It is not rhetorical, like the question about worry: "Are you not of more value than they?" This question from the cross is not offered for the benefit of those listening, like the questions about identity or purpose: "What is your name?" and "What are you looking for?" Rather, Copenhaver claims this question, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me," is an expression of isolation. It is raw and threatening, like an open wound. And, like Jesus hanging on the cross, it hangs in the air unanswered.¹ "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

This question, however, is not simply a question either. It is the beginning of a prayer, the beginning of a psalm, Psalm 22, a psalm Jesus would have known from his Jewish tradition. Perhaps a rabbi in his hometown taught it to Jesus when he was a young man. Maybe his mother Mary or his relative Elizabeth taught Jesus to pray it. Regardless of how or when he learned this holy prayer, it had apparently lodged down deeply inside him, so deeply that it formed the language he used as he took his final breaths.

In my ministry I've seen that kind of thing before. The congregation I served prior to this one was chock full of retired Presbyterian ministers and seminary professors. In my time with those retired ministerial colleagues, I noticed that they tended to die with a perceptible sense of peace about them. I soon realized that peace often came because, as their final days unfolded, they regularly recited scripture passages they had memorized after preaching on them so often or teaching them in Sunday school classes. Furthermore, it wasn't just scripture that would spring to their minds. I would often enter their hospital or hospice rooms to find them quietly singing verses of familiar hymns that had taken root in their souls.

Those sacred times were teachable moments for me, faith-shaping experiences. Those women and men taught me the criticality of immersing myself in the sacred stories and hymns of our faith, so much so that those scriptures and hymns could become almost second nature to me. I would see how, when these pastors or teachers found themselves struggling or facing moments of pain, these words of faith always bubbled up to the surface, reminding them they were not alone and that God was indeed with them in the middle of it. "Great is thy faithfulness," they would sing. "I shall lift up mine eyes to the hills, from whence shall my help come," they would recite. "I once was lost but now am found," they might hum. "And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; death and mourning and pain will be no more," they would pray. These words of scripture, these melodies of faithfulness, had so become a part of the terrain of their souls, a part of the geography of their memories, that when other words failed them, these words, these songs, did not.

Could that be what happened with Jesus? As he hung there, actively dying, did different scripture passages or Hebrew songs from his youth come into his mind? And if so, then why did he have to use this one? After all, this whole text from Matthew would feel differently if Jesus had uttered a different passage. What if, instead of the first line of Psalm 22, Jesus had prayed the first line of Psalm 23, "The Lord is my shepherd"? Or what if he had prayed words from the prophet Isaiah: "Do not be afraid for I am with you"? Either of those passages on the lips of a dying Jesus might have given this narrative of Jesus' final hours a more comforting tone for us disciples.

That is what happens in the Gospel of John. John goes out of his way to portray Jesus as being in complete control of the entire Passion story, even up to the very last moment when he takes his final breath. “It is finished,” Jesus says in John’s telling of the story, before giving up his spirit. There is no cry of abandonment. There is no voice of lament. Not in John’s Gospel.

But here, in both Mark and Matthew, Psalm 22 is what we get. We listen as Jesus cries out with one more question, one not directed to us this time, but only to God—a question as to why the one he had always called Father had not stopped his suffering, had not prevented his pain, had not taken the cup away from him as he had prayed for God to do in the Garden of Gethsemane.

As theologian Raymond Brown has written, in this passage “Jesus is portrayed as profoundly discouraged at the end of his long battle because God, to whose will Jesus committed himself at the beginning of the Passion, has not intervened in the struggle and seemingly has left Jesus unsupported....Jesus cries out, hoping that God will break through the alienation he has felt.”² “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus cries as his breathing becomes more and more labored.

So what are we to make of it? What are we to make of the claim that the first scripture that came to Jesus’ mind, the prayer that best expressed how he felt at the end, was a cry of lament, a prayer expressing abandonment and discouragement? Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor takes some comfort from that truth. In her book of sermons entitled *God in Pain*, she puts it this way:

Christ speaks, not from some safe place outside of human suffering but from the very heart of it. He is the trampled one, the crushed and soiled one whose loyalty to humankind leads him to endure all that we endure—right up to and including the silence of God. When Jesus howls his last question from the cross, it is God who howls—protesting the pain, opposing it all with his last breath. Only this is no defeat. This is, contrary to all appearances, a triumph over suffering. By refusing to avoid it or to lie about it in any way, the crucified one opens a way through it. He hallows it by engaging it.³

The late William Sloane Coffin always preached a similar sentiment: We see in Jesus that God gives us minimum protection but maximum support. Minimum protection but maximum support.

That support shines forth as we sit with this last question Jesus asks before he dies, for how many of us have also traveled through seasons in our lives when praise felt like a distant memory and lament was all we had the energy to do? How many of us have experienced our own dark nights of the soul, when God’s presence felt so hidden to us that we wondered if any of it was real at all, if any of it could be trusted? I have no doubt that our current global pandemic is having this effect on people right now, maybe even on you. “My God, why have you abandoned me?” must be the question on many lips as loved ones suffer and die in isolation and family members cannot be anywhere near.

That is part of what makes Jesus’ very last question so powerful. This last question he asks, formed by a prayer of his faith, tells us that if even Jesus felt that way, then there really is nothing in life or in death that can separate us from God’s love, not even seasons of lament and feelings of God-forsakenness. Jesus has even been

there and cried out honestly about it, refusing to avoid it or to lie about it, thereby making a way through it, hallowing it, demonstrating for us that nothing is outside the reach of the Holy. Furthermore, through his cry of abandonment, God internalized into God's own memory what it is to feel forgotten and left. Hallowed it. Made a way through it. Minimum protection but maximum support.

One last thing: this psalm that Jesus prays, Psalm 22, while it is indeed a prayer of lament, it is also a prayer that does not get stuck forever in lament. After the psalmist vividly expresses his despair and sense of abandonment for the majority of the verses—twenty-one out of thirty-one total—he then moves into praise. We are not told how or why; we just see that the move happens. And that move from lament and God-forsakenness to praise and gratitude telegraphs to us that somehow, in some way, God did indeed hear and respond and intervene. God did indeed lift the psalmist up out of the pit, providing a way out of no way, bringing hope and healing and a new future for the one who could not imagine it on his own. That is how Psalm 22 ends—with thanksgiving for God's faithfulness and God's commitment to being his God.

That shift from honest lament to honest praise causes me to wonder if that might also be another reason why this particular prayer, this particular scripture, was what Jesus chose to speak with his last breath. After all, he knew the whole psalm. Jesus had undoubtedly prayed the entire prayer. Jesus knew what happened near the end and how God, in God's time, did respond to the psalmist's suffering and struggle with liberation and healing. Therefore, might it be that Jesus, by using this question from Psalm 22, was also trying to remind all who would have heard him cry that there would be more to the story, more to his story too? That somehow, even in the middle of agony, even in the middle of honest-to-goodness real suffering and struggle, Jesus still trusted that the pain he endured would not be the end?

Might that also be why these words of scripture sprang into his mind and out of his mouth? Was he hoping that we would remember the whole psalm and take courage? "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus asked, the very last question of his earthly life, a question, though, that did not only express what was, but for those who had the ears to hear, a question that also held out the resilient hope of what would be. For God was not done yet. And God still isn't.

Notes

1 Martin Copenhaver, *Jesus Is the Question* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014), 109.

2 Jon Mecham, *The Hope of Glory: Reflections on the Last Words of Jesus from the Cross* (New York: Penguin Random House Press, 2020), 66.

3 Barbara Brown Taylor, *God in Pain* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 114.