

April 15, 2022

Good Friday

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The psalmist cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me, and are so far from my cry, and from the words of my distress?” They are the impassioned words of one who suffers. And on this Good Friday, we hear them echoed as Jesus is put to death on the cross.

What is it about these words that resonate so deeply with our human experience? Perhaps it is that the pain of abandonment in a moment of profound need is all too familiar, all too common a human experience. In the context of today’s Passion from John, we may also feel the pointed edges and pain that comes when we recognize when we may have abandoned someone else in need. Most of us can recall a time when we’ve been less than our best selves, when despite our best efforts, we just couldn’t muster the energy or the strength to be vulnerable enough to walk with someone through their suffering and pain. Instead, we turned away from the suffering. It felt too much to bear.

For those who loved Jesus, his death was too much to bear. They recoiled at the injustice wielded by empire: the weakness of Pilate, the indifference of the people, the physical abuse of an innocent. Shocked and numbed, some became consumed by the fear that arose out of association with Jesus, fear for their own safety, fear of repercussion.

Helpless and heartbroken by a scene played out that no one could have imagined, Jesus’ mother and his friends cannot see beyond this moment. And what they have seen is too much. A beaten and broken body; hands nailed into wood; idle chatter and mocking laughter; the light of one who had shone so brightly, now visibly dimming before their eyes. As we who love Jesus bear witness to his suffering, we cannot help but be conscious of our own. The invitation is not to turn away, but to allow ourselves to be vulnerable enough to accompany Jesus to his death, even if it feels too much.

In the verses we chanted from Psalm 22, we heard the psalmist’s lament, cries of distress and suffering. If we had continued to read the whole of the psalm, we would hear the psalmist make a shift as he expresses who he knows God to be: the one who hears the cry of his beloved, the one who saves and delivers, the one who does not abandon, but is ever present and always merciful. The psalmist here vacillates between suffering and deliverance, complaint and gratitude – for each is as essential and as real a part of life with God as is the other.

Even the psalmist holds the tension of the heartache and the hope. He speaks the truth of what it is to be human, and to be in relationship with God: that to be human is to suffer, and that to be in relationship with God is to trust in God's deliverance and salvation – even when God seems absent.

In our Passion today, John calls our attention to the Divine Jesus – the Word made flesh who came to save. The light that shines in the darkness, which will not be overtaken. Divine God, in human form, who willingly walked the path of pain and suffering for our benefit, a sacrifice beyond our understanding. For John, the crucifixion is less something that Jesus suffers than something he enacts for the sake of the world.

Perhaps this is the magnifying glass that we are invited to look through – the one that makes clear the depth and sacredness of the humanity and the divinity of Jesus. The very human Jesus who knows intimately what it is to suffer – and the very divine Jesus who assures us that beyond our suffering and the suffering so prevalent in the world is the God who will save and deliver us.

Shortly, we will remember Jesus' crucifixion as the cross is processed into the church. Here we join the throngs of onlookers, the crowds, the soldiers and the disciples, the women and the religious authorities, as we reflect in silence. Holding the tension of the moment, we may find ourselves uncomfortable, longing for consolation. We may become aware that we have no words to offer, because they are not ours to say. On this Good Friday, we wait, we mourn, and we pray, we trust that in Jesus' final words, "It is finished," it is just the beginning.