

## **Final Words: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"**

**Mark 15:29-36a (Matthew 27:46)**

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In our Lenten study book Final Words from the Cross (Abingdon 2013) Pastor Adam Hamilton reminds us that those in the crowd who mock Jesus had just the night before celebrated Passover. Passover of course was the essential annual festival of the Hebrew people as they remembered the God who led them from the bondage of slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. They went from an evening of joyous celebration, songs of praise for the steadfast love of The Lord to become a screaming mob hurling insults and taunts at an innocent man crucified by their enemies.

These were the good and pious people of Jerusalem who frequented the Temple. They prayed for the coming of a messiah who would lead a revolution to drive out the Romans from the occupation of the Holy Land. They put their trust in power and might and expected their God to act accordingly. That Jesus would be dying in shame and humiliation as a common criminal was scandalous.

Are we so different? Don't we want God on our terms? And when God isn't, we turn away?

Pastor Hamilton asks, "Do you see yourself in the crowd?"...."it wasn't Jesus who was on trial, but the human race...." (Hamilton p. 69)

As Jesus dies on the cross, he quotes from Psalm 22, verse one, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It is a hymn describing the depths of human physical and emotional suffering. It speaks of one surrounded by enemies and forces beyond one's control at the time of greatest vulnerability. The psalmist reaches out in desperation for God as the only hope.

That Jesus would quote from the scriptures shortly after a brutal beating, leaving him just inches from death, speaks of the depth of intimacy he had with the Hebrew Scriptures. It also describes his understanding of, and shared experience with, the anguish of the deepest human pain.

Broken bodies and dreams are bad enough but abandonment might be worse.

Institutionalized children will fail to thrive if they do not come into regular human contact. Prisoners can only take so many days of solitary confinement before they break emotionally. Most marriages do not end in divorce because of violence or anger but the weight of growing isolation between two good people that cannot be overcome.

Jesus will share birth, childhood, work, laughter, tears, frustration and joy as a human being, but it may be in this moment when he shares the deepest longing in abandonment that he might be most human of all.

"Commentators have observed that the record in Matthew and Mark is one the strongest proofs that we have an authentic account of what took place on the cross. For what reason would the founders of a new religion put such despairing words in the mouth of

their dying hero...unless that's precisely what he said." (Philip Yancy, The Jesus I Never Knew, Zondervan, 1995, p. 201)

'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

Even today we still think of someone who dies a criminal's death as a failure. Yet those who knew the apostle Paul would later reflect about Jesus, "Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." (Colossians 2:15)

"The racist sheriffs who locked Martin Luther King Jr. in the jail cells, the Soviets who deported Solzhenitsyn, the Czechs who imprisoned Vaclav Havel, the Filipinos who murdered Benigno Aquino, the South Africans who imprisoned Nelson Mandela, all these thought they were solving a problem, yet instead all ended up unmasking their own violence and injustice..." (Yancy p. 203)

In September 1940, during World War II, Adolph Hitler's German Luftwaffe air force mercilessly bombed civilian populations in the United Kingdom, the city of London in particular, killing 43,000 in only nine months. The purpose was to prepare England for invasion by demoralizing its people and defeating their will to fight back. The result was just the opposite.

During twenty years of what we call the Vietnam War, the United States and its allies killed somewhere over 2 million southeast Asians; Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians. Our air force dropped millions of pounds of armaments in that war and on North Vietnam in particular, hoping in part to demoralize its people and defeat their will to win. The result was just the opposite.

Two thousand years ago agents of one of the greatest empires in history colluded with local authorities to crucify a threat to their political status quo. Pontus Pilate and the Sanhedrin thought that the execution of the carpenter from Nazareth would be the end of his story. That it would finish off his movement. They put their faith in power, might and force. The result of their violence was just the opposite.

Here we are two thousand years later honoring the death of that one single man. And where is the Roman Empire? Where is the empire of racial apartheid today? What became of the Third Reich, the dictators of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? Those who worship power, might and force are doomed to fail.

'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

Why?

That through his life, suffering and resurrection Jesus would do for us what we cannot do for ourselves, remove the last illusion of our separation from God which is what we call death.

"What changed history was the disciples' dawning awareness (it took the Resurrection to convince them) that God himself had chosen the way of weakness. The cross redefines God as One who was willing to relinquish power for the sake of love...Power, no matter how well-intentioned, tends to cause suffering. Love, being vulnerable, absorbs it. In a

point of convergence on a hill called Calvary, God renounced the one for the sake of the other.” (Yancy pp. 204-205)

Adam Hamilton reminds us that by quoting the first verse of a hymn, what we call Psalm 22, everyone in hearing distance would have also known how the song ended:

For he did not despise or abhor  
the affliction of the afflicted;  
he did not hide his face from me,  
but heard when I cried to him.

The poor shall eat and be satisfied;  
those who seek him shall praise the Lord.  
May your hearts live forever!

All the ends of the earth shall remember  
and turn to the Lord;  
and all the families of the nations  
shall worship before him. (Ps 22:24, 26-27)

The song that Jesus quotes while dying wasn't just for the crowd. It is also for us. For anyone of us who is at the end of our rope, for whom the pain is too much, for each of us who lives with heartbreak. God understands the darkness we walk through.  
But it does not get the last word.

Maybe it takes those moments when our resources are exhausted and everything we have tried has failed to finally reach out to God on God's terms, not our own.....and in so doing discover the power of love in our lives and for the world.

“God is not greater than He is in his humiliation. God is not more glorious than He is in his self-surrender. God is not more powerful than He is in his helplessness. God is not more divine than He is in his humanity” Jurgen Moltman (Crucified God, Harper & Row, 1974, page 205).

Amen