

“My God, My God, Why Hast Thou Forsaken Me?”

Mark 15:21-39

Jesus had been one of us. He had done our work, faced the temptations and trials that we face. His friends had betrayed him. Yet Jesus had not personally experienced the consequence of sin, which is separation from God, which is being out of relationship with God. Jesus had not sinned but had been united with God. But in today's text something happens that is very difficult to understand if it can be understood at all.

My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me? Jesus has not sinned, yet he is feeling and experiencing the consequence of sin. Jesus is being forsaken, abandoned, isolated, separated by God. Now Jesus is rounding out his humanity. He is experiencing sin and death, forsakenness, and darkness, separation.

But Jesus does not accept this separation. In one final attempt he cries out as only a man can cry, with a full and final force. Jesus makes one last attempt at communicating with his father through prayer. Jesus petitions God, “My God, My God”, and then confronts God in his distress and brings all of his need before him. Why has thou forsaken me? Prayer finds its extreme expression in this final cry of the dying Jesus. The ability to pray kept Jesus from being totally overwhelmed by his loneliness on that cross and kept Jesus from being totally silenced in his distress.

In his final prayer, Jesus asks, “Why?” Why did God demand the crucifixion of Jesus? What are the reasons for God's treating his son like this? Or does God really owe us an explanation of his reasons or a justification of his demands? There is certainly a purpose behind God's will, but we can only know the purpose if God chooses to reveal it to us.

It has been revealed to us that Jesus' crucifixion was God's will and that it was a vicarious death for many who now find freedom from sin. More is not revealed.

Jesus was experiencing a very real God forsakenness. God had withdrawn himself and Jesus was alone. In his loneliness Jesus finds hope through prayer. Each of us feels forsaken or abandoned or betrayed every day. Loneliness and distress are not uncommon. But who do we blame it on?

When you are feeling alone or betrayed who do you confront? Who do you cry out at? I can tell you who you probably cry out at. You cry out at your spouse or your children or your parents or the people you work with or your dog or whoever else is handy. Or worse yet, you keep it inside yourself where it continues to build up until you just can't take it anymore. You are tense, you cannot sleep at night, you are distressed. How many of you am I describing?

I have two suggestions today, the second one probably better than the first. First, you could cry out at your pastor. That's what he is here for. He can take it and it might help you. Second, cry out at God once in a while. Confront God with the tribulations of your life and ask him, "Why hast thou forsaken Me?" If you are in a relationship with God as Jesus was, then God has to expect you to get angry with him once in a while. God probably enjoys being confronted. God enjoys being in a personal relationship with his people and all of the feelings that are involved in a relationship.

Personally, I believe the more you relate to God, the more you pray, the more you confront, the more you get angry, and the more you love God the better your relationship will be. Communication is just as necessary and advantageous in our relationship to God as it is in a marriage relationship.

Where there is no communication, where there is not sharing of feelings there is no relationship. It sounds simple, but we all know communication is not so simple to implement. How difficult it must have been for Jesus to continue to attempt to reach God even as he hung dying on the cross.

We face the same difficulty. It's easy to praise God when things are going well in our life. This morning it's easy to give thanks and praise to God when through the sacrament of holy baptism, God adopts Maxwell into his family. Babies are especially a blessing – for a few years.

But when things go haywire sometimes, we hesitate to confront God. Maybe we are too angry or maybe we have too much else to think about during times of crises. God is not even considered. I will never forget the woman who I visited at the hospital. When I entered her room she said, “No prayers today”. As I thought about it, she was confronting God in her own way. She was thinking about God and prayers and spurning them. She was too angry to pray. You can be sure God heard her anger. They were in relationship and she died as did Jesus. They both experienced the darkness and despair of death as their lives came to an end.

The last 3 verses of today's text: “and Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last and the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that he thus breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was the Son of God!”

The temple curtain had separated God from people. Only the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies behind the curtain once a year on the Day of Atonement. The first thing that happens after Jesus dies is the temple curtain which had separated God from us is torn.

What do we see? What does this hidden God look like? Who is this God we are to be in relationship with and to communicate with?

We begin to see just a glimpse, the shadow of a man nailed to a cross. It has been dark on our side of the curtain. Our eyes are blinded, not used to the light glimmering through the tear in the curtain. We are awaking from a long sleep, awaking from darkness, awaking from isolation, from separation.

God was always on the other side, not really a part of our existence. But now our eyes begin to be opened and it is not what we expected or even desired.

God is not on a throne and wearing a crown. God is not a handsome old man with a long, flowing gray beard. But God is pathetic, a bloody mess, a dead body nailed to a cross. One of us. A man who had experienced the consequences of sin in the darkness of death. God was dead. It could not be. How did he get over there, on the other side of the curtain? This could not be.

Yet a Gentile, a Roman centurian is the first to recognize him. He had seen many dead bodies in the heat of battle, but this one was different. This one was a shining light in the midst of the darkness and at first only he could see it. The curtain kept tearing wider and wider. More and more people began to look through the tear and when they did, when they faced the cross they believed.

God was a man who died just as every person dies, only his was an extremely pathetic death. And it's alright. Death has no power on that side of the curtain, darkness no longer exists. The curtain has been torn. God is no longer confined to the space behind the curtain but has come to us, is one of us and walks with us.

But his light has not yet completely filled this side of the curtain. There remain corners of darkness, very large corners of despair and misery where death still rules.

Syria and Afghanistan are a very large corner where death rules with an iron hand throwing chemicals and bombs wherever they may fall.

God and light and life can exist only for those who look through the tear and as the tear continues to widen more and more people see the dead man on the cross. The light seems to be bursting through the curtain. One has to look but it's scary.

How can a man on a cross be the source of our existence? Some of us must turn away and hide in the corners of darkness. The curtain must eventually be eliminated altogether so there is only light, so the cross must be faced and accepted.

We hear of the Chinese Government disallowing the crucifix in classrooms, disallowing students to face the cross. The government is scared. The power of the cross is strong, so they attempt to eliminate it. But it cannot be eliminated. It can only be turned away from. It can only be hid from.

God really was a man, a dead man, a forsaken man. Death is no longer confined to our side of the curtain but is a part of both sides as they merge together. Jesus has once and for all ended the separation between the father and his children, between the shepherd and his sheep.

At first the revelation, the sight of Jesus dead on a cross scares us but as we begin to see the coming of Easter morning the fear turns to joy as the dead Jesus on the cross becomes the resurrected Christ, the giver of life and light where there was only darkness and death.

I would like to end today with a story from the Brothers Grimm. In this story the farmer represents us, the horse is Jesus who must be forsaken and die in order to have new life, and the fox plays the part of God, the giver of new life.

A farmer had a faithful horse that had grown old and could no longer do its work. Its master didn't want to feed it any longer and said, "I certainly can't use you any longer. Just the same, I have your interest at heart; show that you're still strong enough to bring me a lion, and I'll keep you, but for the present get out of my stable." Thereupon he chased the horse out into the fields.

The horse was sad and went to the forest to seek a little shelter from the weather. There he met a fox who said, "Why are you hanging your head and walking about in so solitary a fashion?" "Alas", answered the horse, "greed and loyalty do not live together in one dwelling. My master has forgotten the services I rendered him for so many years and because I really can't plow anymore, he will no longer feed me and has chased me away." "Without a word of consolation" asked the fox. "The consolation was cold: he said if I was still strong enough to bring him a lion, he'd keep me, but he knows well enough that I can't do that". "I'll get you out of this", said the fox. "Just lie down, stretch out, and don't move as if you were dead". The horse did what the fox ordered.

The fox, however, went to a lion whose den was not far off and said, "There's a dead horse out there. Just come with me and you can have a big meal". The lion went with the fox, and as they were standing by the horse, the fox said, "It really isn't very convenient for you here. Do you know what? I'll tie it to you by its tail so that you can drag it into your den and consume it in perfect peace and quiet".

The lion liked the idea, took up its position, and kept very quiet so the fox could tie the horse to it. But the fox tied the lion's legs together with the horse's tail and twisted and laced it all so thoroughly and firmly that it couldn't possibly be pulled apart by force.

When the fox had finished its work, it tapped the horse on the shoulder and said, "Pull, horse, pull!" Then the horse gave a sudden jump and dragged the lion away with it. The lion began to roar so loud that all the birds in the forest flew up in the air in terror, but the horse let it roar, pulled, and dragged it over the fields to its master's door. From then on, the farmer and horse lived in peace together.

May we during the Easter season bring Jesus back into our home. The Jesus who we first condemned to death. The Jesus who overcame forsakenness and returned to us, the resurrected Christ.

May the peace of God . . .

#781 – Children of the Heavenly Father