

Friday March 29th, 2024

Good Friday

“Free! Really?”

Today is a day when many voices join to ask one specific question. “Why is God so silent in the face of so much suffering and pain?” The reason this question is so powerful today is because the one place where God seemed the most silent was at the cross of his own Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus himself cried out, “Eloi, Eloi lama Sabachthani.” “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

It is those words that haunt us, not just today, but on so many days. “My God, why?” These are words that have echoed down through all the centuries from that fateful day at Calvary. Why, we wonder, was God so silent at Jesus’ cross? Only Mark and Matthew recorded these words from the cross. Luke and John recorded other words that were not contained in the other gospels, but these words are there. “Why have you forsaken me?”

So, what we may wonder, prompted Jesus to say these words? A) Was this a cry of doubting as some people believe? Hanging on the cross, did Jesus ask himself, “Have I misunderstood my calling? Have I been wrong about the mission of the Messiah? Did this cry raise large questions about the purpose of his life? Being crucified like a common criminal maybe forced him to rethink his mission. Were, the mocking tongues, right? Had he wasted his life?

B) Was it a cry of desertion? All had forsaken him. Where was Peter at the cross? Where was Matthew? And Zacchaeus? Where was the centurion whom he had helped? Where was the once blind Bartimaeus? Where were the crowds that pressed around him? The crowds he fed from five loaves and two fishes or the crowds who brought their sick and demon possessed to him to be healed. Where are they? Here he was-deserted, isolated, and alone.

C) Was it a cry of depression? Here nailed to the cross, he was isolated and rejected by his friends. Some of his own family saw what he was doing and thought he was insane. Broken and misunderstood, maybe his spirits sank into deep depression. He saw his dream to bring in the Kingdom of God aborted.

D) Was it a cry of dereliction? Did God abandon him at the cross, as some theologians has suggested? Was it a cry of absolute isolation? Did God turn his back on his Son? A derelict ship is one abandoned by men and even rats. Did Jesus raise his cry against an empty sky? Was he in the depths of despair? Did the cross thrust him into the “dark night of the soul”? Was that the cause of his cry?

Maybe Jesus experienced some, or all of this, but let me suggest that this cry of Jesus was one primarily of identification. Here at the cross, God was uniquely in Christ. Here at the cross, we see God identifying with men and women, you, and I, in all our suffering. God was nowhere more present than at the cross. At the cross, Jesus completely identified with our humanity as he suffered the consequences of humanity’s sin.

In other words, his fate on the cross should have been ours.

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The scene around the cross has so many mini dramas taking place. One of them is that when Jesus cried out, “Eloi, Eloi Lama Sabachthani” which is in the Aramaic language the crowds thought he was calling for Elijah. Muttered through painful lips, “Eloi” might be mistaken for the prophet’s name. But Jesus’ words have nothing to do with Elijah but everything to do with Psalm 22. His cry is a quotation from that Psalm.

Maybe you realized that when it was read for us earlier, but did you also happen to hear in Psalm 22 the last few lines. Lines that talk not of abandonment but speak of hope and assurance. (Psalm 22:23-24, 27, 31) Could it be that Jesus was preparing us to hear the last words from the cross? For as we know the last words from the cross were not, “I am forsaken”.

The last words from the cross were a shout of victory, “It is finished!” Forsaken was not the last word in Psalm 22, nor was it from the cross. Jesus did cry out in identification with all of humanity, but he also ended his life, used his last breath, to express the triumphal assurance of the presence of God.

That’s the point, isn’t it? That is why this day has such significance for us. At the cross of Christ, you and I discover that God gives us the same kind of answer in his silence that he gave his son at Calvary. The experience of Jesus on the cross gives us confidence in the face of our own life’s tragedies and pains.

In May 1995, Randy Reid, a 34-year-old construction worker, was welding on top of a nearly completed water tower outside Chicago. According to writer Melissa Ramsdell, Reid unhooked his safety gear to reach for some pipes when a metal cage slipped and bumped the scaffolding on which he stood. The scaffolding tipped, and Reid lost his balance.

Reid fell 110 feet, landing face down on a pile of dirt, just missing rocks, and construction debris. A fellow worker called 911. When paramedics arrived, they found Reid conscious, moving, and complaining of a sore back. Apparently, the fall didn’t cost Reid his sense of humour.

As paramedics carried him on a backboard to the ambulance, Reid had one request: “Don’t drop me”. Doctors later said Reid came away from the 110-foot fall with only a bruised lung. The cross of Christ reminds us that God has already taken the deadly fall for us, and we have no reason to be nervous about the three-foot heights that frightens us. Even when in our nervousness we long for God’s voice and we receive only silence.

It is very interesting to note in the scriptures how much silence surrounded Jesus’ life, from beginning to end. When Jesus was born, only a small number of people, a few shepherds and later a few wise men, knew of his birth. In one of our Christmas hymns we even sing about this mystery of silence: “How silently, how silently the gift is given”. The scriptures only focus on one episode in his childhood-when he was twelve years old in the temple in Jerusalem.

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What happened during the other periods of his childhood? How incredibly silent the biblical writers were! There is nothing except silence regarding his young manhood until he began his ministry at thirty years of age. Most of his life is unknown to us. The scriptures are silent.

Do you remember the story about the Syrophenician woman who came to Jesus (Mark 7) and asked him to heal her child, and Jesus did not answer her with one word? He was silent at first. When he stood before the high priest, Herod, and Pilate, he was silent. When Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, "My God, let this cup pass from me," he received only silence from God. Then of course, he hung on the cross and cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" there again nothing but silence.

What does all this silence mean? Maybe it reveals that God does not explain to us the mystery of suffering and pain. Rather than an explanation, God gives us a presence. The answer is that God is present in with us in the good and the evil. The book of Job struggles with the dilemma of suffering.

In the end Job discovers there is no easy answer to the problem of suffering. Job was unwilling to attribute all suffering to the punishment of sin. The biblical writers affirmed that God is not only in the beautiful dimensions of life but also in the ugly and difficult. They affirmed God's presence in the flood as well as in a flower. God is present in the storm as well as in the sunshine, in plenty but also in famine, in defeat as well as in victory. All of life is under the sovereignty of God. Nothing separates us from Him.

Can you hear the Apostle Paul's words calling out from Romans 8? "Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or are hungry, or cold or in danger or threatened with death? No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ who loved us." (Vs. 35, 37)

God does not answer all our questions. God gives us God's presence. God gives himself to us in the midst of our struggles. Sometimes God's presence is discovered not in the noise around us, but in silence. At the cross, God's great redemption is accomplished in the silent act of suffering. Amid our own pains, struggles, and difficulties we discover that we are not left to bear them alone; God is present.

The ancient Christian writer, Ignatius, once wrote, "God affects more by his silence than others do with all their talking." As you and I reflect today on the cross, let us remember that God gives us not an explanation to the problem of evil, suffering, and pain but a presence. God has not forsaken us; God is always present.

In the most silent moments of your life's deepest pain, you are not alone, but the God who was in Christ on the cross is present also with you. And that, my dear friends, is the source of our confidence.