



Sermon Series: The Seven Last Words of Jesus

“My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?”

FUMC, Arlington, Texas

23 March 2014: Third Sunday in Lent

Preaching Text: Mark 15:33-39

The church has traditionally developed from harmonies of the Gospel passion story Jesus’ final seven last words or phrases from the cross. The “Seven Words” the church also knows as the “Devotion of the Three Hours.” These three hours run from noon on Good Friday to 3:00 P.M. At this time we remember Christ’s hours on the cross. We have used the common order of the readings for our worship series. In fact, today’s lesson from Mark occurs at the center of the readings—as the fourth reading. Here are the seven readings to put our lesson in context:

- | | |
|------------------|---|
| 1) Luke 23:34 | “Father, forgive them.” |
| 2) Luke 23:43 | “Today you will be with me in paradise.” |
| 3) John 19:26-27 | “Woman, here is your son.” |
| 4) Mark 15:34 | “My God, why have you forsaken me?” (also Mt 27:46) |
| 5) John 19:28 | “I am thirsty.” |
| 6) John 19:30a | “It is finished.” |
| 7) Luke 23:46 | “Into your hands I commend my spirit.” |

Now, hear the gospel according to Mark 15:33-39:

[33] When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. [34] At three o’clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” [35] When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, “Listen, he is calling for Elijah.” [36] And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.” [37] Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. [38] And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. [39] Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” (Mark 15:33-39).



In this text, we can see three distinctive responses to Jesus' cry of dereliction. This word "dereliction" simply means abandonment, neglect, forsaking, or desertion—as in "dereliction of duty." These responses are human reactions to the horror of Jesus put to death on a cross as the guiltless (or innocent) Messiah of God. The three reactions consist of misunderstanding, derision, and confession.

The first reaction to Jesus crying out with a loud voice, "*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?*" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" is simply misunderstanding. Mark alerts his readers, "When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'Listen, he is calling for Elijah.'" Like the disciples, Mark portrays those who stand by and witness Jesus' execution as people who do not understand what is going on here. In truth, they do not have any idea—they are, in the words of our youth, "totally clueless." The Jewish tradition sees Elijah as the rescuer of the righteous, but Jesus is not really calling Elijah. Rather, Jesus here on the cross prays the 22nd Psalm. Jesus addresses God directly through his own Hebraic prayer tradition.

Over and over again in Mark we see the theme of misunderstanding. No one seems to know exactly who Jesus is or why he has come. This plays out what Yahweh suggested to Isaiah "in the year King Uzziah died" in Isaiah 6: "They may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand." Jesus said as much to his own disciples, "Do you not understand this parable" (Mark 4:12)? Mark also tells us all through his Gospel "they did not understand about the loaves" (Mark 6:52), "Then do you also fail to understand?" (Mark 7:18), "Do you still not perceive or understand?" (Mark 8:17), and "Do you not yet understand?" (Mark 8:21). In sum, the disciples and other's



inability to understand Jesus we see put in a nutshell: “But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him” (Mark 9:32). Complete misunderstanding was the first response to Jesus’ cry of dereliction.

The second response to Jesus’ cry of dereliction was that of derision. Basically, Jesus is mocked. A mysterious “someone [who] ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, ‘Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.’” We see this kind of reaction in all the crucifixion accounts and we need not convince anyone here about this now. The crowds and soldiers mock the Lord of life as he dies. Those who ridicule and deride Jesus only wax cynical in the face of the enthronement of glory. A second response to Jesus’ cry of dereliction was that of derision. This is a dangerous response for as Paul once wrote: “Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow” (Galatians 6:7 NRSV).

Remaining is the third response: confession. Mark uses extreme irony, reminding us that although the Gentiles are tangled up in Jesus’ death, it is a Gentile centurion soldier who even so declares, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” Tried and mocked as King of the Jews, the Romans also crucify Jesus. Those surrounding the cross ridicule Jesus as Messiah, the King of Israel; with robbers, not disciples, at his right and left hands. Jesus is Messiah, King and Son of God, but his coronation is satirical. His throne is a cross, his courtiers two robbers, and his public enemies kill him. The only one present who recognizes this suffering Son of man to be the royal Son of God is a Gentile soldier who sees the truth only after Jesus dies and the Temple curtain is split in two (Williamson, Jr., *Mark: WJK Press*, 1983, pp. 277-8).

What will our response be to Jesus’ cry from the cross? Will we



misunderstand the ministry of the church as the crucified Body of Christ for the world? Will we forget that true disciples are those who serve others as Jesus has first served us? Will we confuse the church with a social club, where like-minded people get together to enjoy each other's company?

Or will we mock Jesus as the Son of God? I knew a man who said, "I don't go to church because the church is only a poor man's country club." Or worse, will we say one thing on Sunday before God's throne and altar and then go about our dirty business on Monday through Saturday? If we do so, then we forsake the very God who gives us abundant life through Jesus. To mock God by our life and despite our confessions of faith is possibly the worst kind of betrayal.

True disciples, after God exposes us to the kind of divine evidence that the torn curtain provided the Roman centurion, will follow the Lord wherever he leads us. Some days God provides our life in faith with pure joy; other days God will put us to suffering with Jesus. Some day one, other days another, but the choice is ours. Here and now, dear friends, Christ offers us bread for our journeys. When we consider Jesus' sacrifice for us and the world, and when in turn we offer our sacrifice for Christ's Body—the church as Jesus' witness to the truth of God—then we honor Christ by the confession of our lives. When we surrender to our world as the broken Body of Christ—the church—then we are truly disciples and stewards of the Word.

Rupert Brooke wrote these words in his poem "The Call:"

The eternal silences were broken;
Hell became Heaven as I passed.
What shall I give you as a token,
A sign that we have met, at last?



I want to close with a quotation by Richard John Neuhaus who was a leading theologian in the U.S. Catholic Church:

And so we are brought back to “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” God is present in his apparent absence. God’s absence is embodied in the body of Israel and in the extension of that body, the New Israel, which is the Church. God is present in the forsaken so that nobody—nobody ever, nobody anywhere at any time under any circumstance—is forsaken.

It is in God’s willingness to allow Jesus to suffer utter human desolation that Jesus become God’s incarnation for us—and thereby our real and authentic hope in this life—and in the next. Amen.