

**SERMON: “O the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus” Part 3
“God-With-Us To The Depths”**

March 22, 2009

Prayer for Illumination: Mighty God, by the power of your word read and proclaimed save us from the clichés of faith that never peer into the darkness and depths of life, and thus have no power to heal wounded hearts or to call generations yet to come to rejoice in your strength to deliver in life and over death. This we ask in the name of Christ, our crucified Redeemer, from whose love nothing in all creation can ever separate us. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 22 (sel. verses)

Gospel Lesson: Mark 15:33-39

This morning we come to the third in a series of sermons on “The Deep, Deep Love of Jesus.” Each Sunday leading up to Palm Sunday and Easter we are looking at texts from the Old Testament which provide the deep background for the drama at the heart of the gospels--the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ.

We began by looking at the “**binding of Isaac**” with its ringing affirmation that “**the Lord will provide himself the lamb for the sacrifice, my son.**” Then we turned to Hosea’s poignant lament in the wounded heart of God, “**How can I give you up, O Ephraim?... I am God, and no mortal, and I will not come in wrath.**” This morning we come to the psalm that provides the template by which the gospel writers sought to interpret the meaning of the death of Jesus on the cross--Psalm 22.

Before we turn to the psalm itself, we need to be clear about the fact that Jesus’ death on the cross was not just the brutal end to a life of self-giving love. Crucifixion was not merely a horrible way to die—though surely it was that. It was not merely Rome’s way of terrorizing those it considered threats to its law and order—though that is how it was used. To a faithful Jew, to be hung on a tree, to be crucified, was to be cursed by God. In Deuteronomy we read, “**When someone is convicted of a crime punishable by death and is executed, and you hang him on a tree...you shall bury him that same day, for anyone hung on a tree is under God’s curse.**” (Dt. 21:22-23) To be “hung on a tree,” to be crucified, was to be “under God’s curse.”

One of my favorite hymns is the lovely “What Wondrous Love Is This.” We sang it a couple of weeks ago. But as much as I love the hymn itself, I cannot stand what some contemporary editor has done to the first stanza of the hymn in our *Presbyterian Hymnal*. The first stanza goes like this:

“What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul,
What wondrous love is this, O my soul.
What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss
To bear the *heavy cross* for my soul, for my soul.”

“**Heavy cross**”? You got to be kidding! What nonsense! It is not the weight of the cross, or even its physical anguish, that matters most. It is what the cross signifies. The original wording of the hymn had it right.

“What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss
To bear **the dreadful curse**, for my soul, for my soul.”

To bear the “**dreadful curse.**” That’s what the cross is about—the Christ of God bearing the “dreadful curse” of God to bear it away. The sinless One taking our sin and suffering into God’s own being, to take it away.

When you stop to pay attention to it, one of the most stunning features in all the gospels of the New Testament is the fact that those who knew and believed most passionately in the resurrection of Jesus gave so much attention to his suffering and death on the cross. Think about it. If you had been commissioned by the risen Christ to go and tell the gospel story, wouldn't you have wanted to trumpet the resurrection as loudly as you could, and down play the crucifixion? Why call attention to that "recent unpleasantness" when you know the story does not end there? Why raise questions in people's minds as to why both the Roman authorities and the Jewish leaders were so determined to cross Jesus out?

Our natural human tendency would be to skip over the crucifixion and jump directly from the life and teachings of Jesus to his resurrection. That is exactly what too often is done--especially in churches that do not have a Good Friday service. I suspect that *good* Good Friday services are getting about as rare these days as a birdie on the 10th hole at Augusta. We are continually tempted to go directly from a festive service on Palm Sunday to an even more festive service on Easter, with little or no mention of what lies between.

But the gospels themselves are more brutally honest than that. They devote by far the largest block of material to the last week of Jesus' life. The Gospel of Mark has been called "a passion narrative with an extended introduction." The story of the crucifixion of Jesus is central to all four of the gospels. It is essential to the meaning of the whole drama of salvation. In the words of the Presbyterian *Declaration of Faith*, "In the death of Jesus on the cross God achieved and demonstrated once for all the costly forgiveness of our sins." (DF, ch. 4 lines 96-98)

But costly forgiveness and costly discipleship are not very high on the agenda of many American churches, especially the churches that are driven by a growth-agenda. "Hide the cross," advised a church-growth consultant, "hide the cross, it turns people off." No doubt it does, and well it should.

So how do we begin to grasp what the crucifixion of Jesus is all about, and more importantly, how does it begin to grasp us? One way by which the church across the centuries has sought to grasp and be grasped by the deep, deep love of God in the cross of Christ is through praying and reflecting on the psalms—especially Psalm 22. As I said at the beginning of the sermon, Psalm 22 provides a template by which the early church sought to understand more deeply, and to communicate more fully, the meaning of Jesus' death on the cross. In the face of something as totally overwhelming as the death of their Lord and Master on a cross, the early disciples reached back into their sacred scriptures to find words and images by which to proclaim that which was almost beyond the power of language to convey.

Psalm 22 served that purpose perfectly. The psalm begins with an anguished cry of abandonment by God and moves to a profound affirmation of trust in God. The psalm moves dramatically from the depths of lonely despair to a crescendo of praise that echoes throughout the earth and to all future generations. The psalm alternates between expressions of despair and trust as it gives voice to the deep struggle of one who in his own soul moves from a sense of abandonment by God to the profound conviction that God has indeed heard his cry and has promised deliverance, not only to him, but to all who "go down to the dust" in death. How better could the early church interpret the saving death of the Lord of life than by means of Psalm 22, and Isaiah 53 which we will consider next week?

The writers of Matthew and Mark in particular found in Psalm 22 the language they needed to do two things at once—to emphasize the real and complete sense of abandonment by God that

the Beloved Son Jesus experienced as he bore the “dreadful curse” of the sins of the world, and, at the same time, to affirm that, even in the depths of his spiritual anguish, nevertheless, the Beloved Son died in complete trust in God the Father, knowing that through his life and death God had indeed accomplished his purposes of salvation for all time.

Holding those two things together—an anguished sense of abandonment by God and a deep sense of trust in God, even when God seems far off and silent--is not easy. Yet both are true in the death of Jesus as told in the gospels, and both are true for us in him. That is why Psalm 22 can have such powerful pastoral meaning to us, as Jesus invites us to make the psalm our own.

The psalm opens with the anguished cry of a righteous sufferer: **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer and by night, but find no rest.”**

Have you ever wondered the same thing—perhaps not that intensely or desperately, but have you ever wondered where is God when you need God the most? Have you ever prayed to God, and nothing seemed to happen, at least not the way you asked, and no answer that you could discern seemed to come from the prayer, only empty silence, with barely a whisper. If you live long enough, if you experience life deeply enough, if you take your faith in God seriously enough, chances are good that you will experience something akin to that of the psalmist.

In fact, just the other day Steve told me of an intensely honest conversation he had with a member of the church who confessed that he did not and could not pray. “Every time I try to pray,” he said, “nothing happens, no good comes of it. In fact, it seems as if every time I pray, I jinx myself and the ones for whom I pray. If all that I can do is offer superstitious prayers that I know are not answered, why bother?”

But what if...what if, as the both the psalm and the gospel insist, Jesus died precisely for those who don't have a prayer...or at least died for those whose only prayer is a cry, a scream, an inarticulate groan, **“My God, my God, why...?”**

But do not miss the fact that even in his sense of abandonment by God the psalmist still cries out to the One he addresses as **“MY God!”** The psalmist does not curse his fate! He does not shake his fist in the face of heaven. He cries out to the One who, even in his deeply felt absence, is still the One with whom his life is most intimately bound. **“My God, My God, why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?”**

The psalmist is not asking for an explanation for his suffering, and none is given. As someone has said, “even the suffering that makes sense must still be borne.” The psalmist is not asking for a satisfying answer as to why he feels abandoned by God. Any “answer” would still leave him just as desperate. What he is asking for the assurance that, even in his sense of abandonment by God, nevertheless, God hears his cry and stands by him. The fact that God does is the powerful witness of both Psalm 22 and the whole of the gospels. The God who is with us in Jesus Christ is with us all the way. There is nothing half-hearted in the heart of God.

What is at stake here is nothing less than the **full extent of our salvation**. Only if Jesus knew in full measure a sense of being forsaken by the God he trusted with all his being can he truly be the Savior of the forsaken, the redeemer of the rejected, the bearer of the broken in body, mind, and soul. Only if he experienced the full depths of abandonment, can his redeeming love reach all the way down to whatever depths of abandonment we may experience.

That, I think, in large measure is what the phrase in the Apostles' Creed "**he descended into hell**" is all about. There are some of you who are troubled by the phrase, and some who do not say it, or at least do not say it very loudly. But in the light of Psalm 22 and the passion of Jesus in all the gospels, we can say, and say with full confidence, that his redeeming love reaches all the way to the depths of hell itself. The lovely *Heidelberg Catechism* from the 16th century asks,

"Why is there added: 'He descended into hell?'" And answers, "That in my severest tribulations I may be assured that Christ my Lord has redeemed me from hellish anxieties and torments by the unspeakable anguish, pains, and terrors which he suffered in his soul both on the cross and before." (Q. 44)

In the midst of my "most hellish anxieties and torments," he is there *with me* and *for me*, all the way, for there are no depths in life or death to which his redeeming love cannot reach.

So here come with me a step further into the deep, deep love of Jesus, and note that this psalm, which begins with an anguished cry of abandonment, ends with one of the most ringing affirmations of trust in God in all of scripture. In words and images that the gospel writers use to depict the passion of Jesus, the psalmist cries,

"I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint... my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death. For dogs are all around me; a company of evildoers encircle me; they have pierced my hands and feet...they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots. But you, O Lord, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly to my aid!"

And God does. Suddenly, without explanation in the text, as suddenly as the resurrection itself, the psalmist's cry of despair turns into an invitation to faith and a song of praise.

"You who fear the Lord, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him; stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel! 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. All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations. To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him. Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it."

That is what we are moving toward at Good Friday and Easter, as we celebrate again and again the "deep, deep love of Jesus," that reaches all the way down to whatever depths of despair we may inhabit in order to raise us up in hope, and call forth, even from us, songs of praise that echo across the generations, "**proclaiming the Lord's deliverance to a people yet unborn, that he has done it.**" He has wrought it. "**It is finished!**" To him be all glory and majesty, all dominion and power, now and forever more. Amen.

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