

Today we continue our fourth week of our “Final Words from the Cross” sermon series. Our statement to reflect upon today is “My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?” If we are honest, we have all had a moment in our lives where we have asked God this question. For me, it is when I was in my first year of seminary. After many conversations and much deliberation my fiancé and I decided to break up. We had been together for five years. We had planned a future together. Before I left to go to Duke Divinity School he proposed in a grand gesture to show his love for me.

You see I was on a certain trajectory. I graduated college, I was to finish seminary and then get married to my high school sweetheart. Things were not supposed to happen this way...especially not to me. Although we both made the decision together to end our relationship so we could both move forward in other areas of our life, I was crushed. He was my first true love and my best friend. What was I supposed to do now? I felt like life as I knew it was over.

I found myself in a new state and new place my first year of seminary and coming in I did not know anyone. My first semester I had spent so much time going back and forth from Duke to Tech that I had not tried to make new friends, so I did not have a support system.

To make matters worse, I had shared about my breakup in my required Duke covenant group and the leader quickly moved on to the next person, not stopping to pray for me, not seeming to acknowledge the depth of my pain or this important life event. I had great family and friends from back home, but I felt alone. I was also angry. I thought “God, I finally have surrendered my life to you. I am here. I am in seminary on my way to being a pastor. Why now? Why could I not have this one thing and be happy? Do I really have to sacrifice everything I care about for you?” I was in a dark place and uttered these same words of Jesus Christ.

We all have experiences in life that lead us to this place. We live in a broken world where there is pain and suffering. We lose the people we love. Life is not fair. Others always seem to be able to get ahead while we feel like we are working just as hard or even harder.

It is comforting for us today to know that Jesus also knew what it felt like for everything to go wrong. Jesus knew what it felt like to feel like he had been abandoned by God.

Now, we know that God was with Christ, because Jesus was the Son of God, a person of the Trinity who was never separated from God.

If we take a closer look, Adam Hamilton tells us Jesus chose his words in this statement carefully, in fact he was praying.¹ We heard these same words in the Psalter from Psalm 22. This psalm was written by King David as he was experiencing persecution and is eerily similar to Jesus’ experience on the cross. In Psalm 22 we hear these words: “I am worn, and not human; scorned by others and despised by the people. All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads...Many bulls encircle me...they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots...”

The same thing was happening to Jesus. He was not being treated with integrity and respect, people were dehumanizing him through the way they were speaking to him and torturing him. This is what happens when we mistreat others, we do not recognize them as people or children of God but merely objects we use for our own pleasure and enjoyment. Hamilton shared that the crowd got swept up in the sensationalism of what was happening.

You know what I am talking about...people who would never behave a certain way, chose to be hateful, chose to root for violence, because that is what the rest of the crowd was doing. We see this same thing happen in mob mentality, where people go along with horrible things because it is what the rest of the group is doing.

The sad thing is we also see this type of mentality in both children and adults. In our humanity, our sinful nature takes over and we take part in putting down other people to make ourselves feel better. In youth we see this with cyber bullying. Youth incessantly harass one of their peers, sometimes even to the point of the one being bullied choosing suicide over the harassment.

In adults this behavior is a little more subtle. It can look like concern over another, but really becomes gossip and puts down the other person speaking about their poor life choices. We are all in danger of being swept up in this mob mentality. Whether we choose to partake in harming another person physically, emotionally, or spiritually, or whether we stand idly by why others are treated badly, we all have the opportunity every day to take responsibility for ourselves and be intentional about not dehumanizing anyone.

Through our community Lenten services, we have been focusing on studying “the least of least” as Jesus referenced those in need in Matthew 25. We have to see ourselves as both the least of these in need of Christ’s redemption, and that we are also called to minister to the least of these because when we serve the least of these, we serve Christ.

How are we being intentional about serving even the least of these? How are we taking our time each day to make sure that others are being treated with integrity and respect because innately they have worth because they were created by God?

I acknowledge I also fail doing these things every day, but each day we are called to try. For myself, I try and take time to really see the people I am with. I try to smile at people when I am out and about in town and I even try to chat people up in the community. I try to sacrifice my time to be with those who utter these same words of Jesus. Whether it is a family member, or friend, or church member, I remind people of their worth, that they are loved, and that they are here for a reason, they have something beautiful to give the world.

God has blessed me with amazing family and friends who were there for me in the difficult moments of my life. In seminary right after my breakup God sent me a friend named Ashley. She journeyed with me through my grief and I helped her with some of hers as well. We are all dealing with something aren’t we?

Ashley and I developed a beautiful friendship that continues today. We have seen each other continue to live out the calling that God has placed on our lives. Also, we have both since been married and had our first children and we are both now UMC pastors me in Virginia and her in Texas.

When we are going through difficult things in life, it is sometimes hard for us to look toward the future with hope, but time after time I see that God’s plan for my life was better than any plan I ever could have made. I wish I could have believed that in the dark moments of my life, so I feel I am charged with sharing this same message of Christ with others.

The good news for our lives today is that God has not abandoned us, God is with us, and God is offering us a future with hope.

We will all have difficult moments in life, but it is not end, eventually things will look up and we will enjoy life again.

What we see when Jesus Christ quoted Psalm 22 is that his cry “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” is not the end of the story. Hamilton explained that the Jews at the cross who heard these words would take special meaning from them.

He said it would be like them hearing a familiar song in which they knew all the words. They would be able to identify that this was Psalm 22 in which the ending the psalmist does not continue to feel abandoned by God. Psalm 22:24 reads: ²⁴ 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.”

Even though it may not always feel like it, God hears our desperate prayers and does not turn away from us. We are called to be thankful that God does not forsake or abandon us, even when we may feel otherwise. We are also called to be thankful for the cost of discipleship. We must recognize that there was a cost for our salvation.

In the book “The Cost of Discipleship” by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian and Lutheran pastor, who opposed the rise of fascism in Germany, Bonhoeffer explains that grace is not cheap, but costly. He says, “Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow...Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives [humanity] the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justified the sinner...Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.”ⁱⁱ

We too are called to sacrifice our time and our resources to give to those in desperate need. We are called to put aside our own needs to care for God’s people, especially those imprisoned by depression and anxiety. We can be part of Christ’s ministry of hope in the world by shining a light in the darkness for someone who is stuck.

Today I challenge all of you to think of two people in your life. First think of someone who helped you through a difficult time and write them a card or send them text message or call to thank them. Sometimes during our periods of darkness we are unable to thank those who gave so much to us. I did get to thank Ashley this week through a text message and what was beautiful was she thanked me as well for being there for her.

Second, we are called to be on the lookout for those in need of Christ’s hope. Perhaps we have a family member, friend, or co-worker who is really struggling. Maybe these folks need a listening ear or some words of compassion or grace.

Maybe these people need to be told it is okay pray these same words of Jesus in the Bible and that they will not be smited for doing so. Reach out to these people, tell them you care and you love them, and if more care is needed, please reach out to me and I will help you find the resources to move forward with a care plan.

Perhaps you are the one today in need of someone to be there for you. Maybe you are going through a hard time or find yourself lonely, sad or depressed.

Reach out to someone, you do not have to go through the difficult things in life alone, your church family is here to help you, I am here to help you.

May we all embody the compassion and grace of God and remember that Jesus knew our pain, died our death, and rose again to offer us hope and new life. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ Adam Hamilton. “Final Words from the Cross.” Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 2011. P. 78

ⁱⁱ Dietrich Bonhoeffer. “The Cost of Discipleship.” SCM Press: Albans Place, London, 1959.