

Forsakenness

A Good Friday Sermon

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Matthew 27:45-46 — From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock, Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?"—which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

If you're the kind of person who likes theological debates, you've got at least a couple here in this passage. Jesus's cry of forsakenness in the final moments of his life has raised a number of questions throughout the history of Christian thought. For one, there are the questions of what exactly the eternal God was doing in those final moments. Did God *really* forsake Jesus—abandon him, desert him, leave him on the cross to die alone? In what sense and to what extent did God do this, and what did it mean for Jesus? For God? What might it mean for us? That's one set of questions.

Another set focuses not on the eternal God, but on the human Jesus: Did he *really* think that God had forsaken him, and was he really asking why? Some Christians will insist that Jesus's question was not a real question: to the extent that God had forsaken him, they will say, Jesus knew why, and he *must* have known why—must have known that this was all a part of God's plan for the salvation of the world. Other Christians will say it's perfectly possible that Jesus, in his humanness, did not know—with absolute, unwavering certainty—all that God was doing in his life and death, and we should hear his question for what it is: a question, cried out from the depths of despair. And so, Christians follow different paths of theological inquiry, trying to get inside Jesus' head...as he bleeds and suffocates to death.

If these kinds of debates are edifying for you, by all means, have at it. But I will say that I think all of these theological questions risk missing the main point that these two verses are conveying. What the story most wants us to take away here, I think, is not that God actually forsook Jesus, or that God didn't actually forsake Jesus; it's not that Jesus thought God had forsaken him, or that Jesus didn't think God had forsaken him; it's not that Jesus knew all that God was doing, or that Jesus didn't know all that God was doing. Rather, what I think we are meant to take away, first and foremost, is that in the final moments of his life, Jesus *felt* forsaken by God. And strange though it may sound, I think that there is good news for us in Jesus's feeling of forsakenness.

Sometimes, feelings matter more than reality, no? People who've been in the depths of despair know this well. Let's say you are struggling with depression, and you are confiding in a friend. You tell them, "Some days, I just feel so alone," and immediately, they jump in: "Oh but you're not alone—I'm here with you! I'll always be here for you!" Maybe those words bring you comfort, but maybe they just make things worse. "I *know* that you are here with me," you think,

“and I know that you are here for me in general, but what I’m saying is that I still *feel* alone.” Sometimes, feelings matter more than reality—although it’s more accurate to speak of feelings as a part of our reality. And sometimes, even when the reality of our circumstances improves, the reality of our feelings does not. Sometimes, our wounds are healing on the outside, but on the inside, we are still bleeding.

A while back, my home church up in New York City began a ministry for homeless youth who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and any other sexual orientation or gender identity outside the norm. There’s a spot on the Hudson River, not too far from the church, where a lot of these homeless teenagers gather during the day. Many of them were kicked out of their homes halfway across the country, and now they’re here in this big city, and they really don’t have anywhere else to go. Our church’s basement has a handful of showers, which don’t get used very often, so the church leadership decided that we could arrange for these teenagers to use our showers a couple of times a week. On the first day of this new ministry, our associate pastor—who happens to be gay as well—led a large group of homeless teenagers from that spot on the river to our church. Some of them were sheepish, others were ecstatic, all of them were grateful for a rare opportunity to do what most of us do everyday (at least what most of us *should* do everyday).

At the back of the group was one kid. He was the last one to get to the door leading into the church, and once he got there, he didn’t go in. He *couldn’t* go in. He knew that there were no strings attached to this shower; he knew that this church was fully welcoming and affirming of people like him; he knew that the pastor who had brought them over there was gay himself; he knew that everyone else was getting clean and warm and refreshed, for the first time in God knows how long, and still: this homeless gay teenager could not bring himself to step into a church building. He was not forsaken by our church. And yet, so badly had other Christians wounded him, so painful were the scars they left on his mind and heart and maybe body, that he still *felt* forsaken. And that’s what mattered.

It doesn’t fix things to tell that homeless kid, “It’s alright! You can really come in!” It doesn’t fix things to tell the person living with depression, “It’s alright. You’re not really alone.” It doesn’t fix things to tell Jesus, or anyone else being crucified, “It’s alright. God hasn’t forsaken you.” It doesn’t fix things because when you’re being crucified—whether it’s for who you love, or for how you identify, or for the diagnosis you live with, or for the worldly powers you prophetically confront—when you’re being crucified, you *feel* forsaken. And Jesus, in the final moments of his life, felt forsaken by God.

Where is the good news here? In these two verses, in Jesus’s cry from the depths of despair, I hear permission for you and for me to feel forsaken. Because if Jesus, who was closer to the eternal God than any of us has ever been, and who lived a beautiful, perfectly abundant life with God, in God, and as God, if *this* Jesus can feel forsaken by God, and in one of his final breaths, shout it out in utter agony, then you and I can too. In fact, we as Christians come from a long line of people who felt utterly forsaken, abandoned, deserted. And we see this in the fact that when

Jesus cries, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”, he is quoting someone from his own faith tradition, writing a thousand years earlier in Psalm 22.

The good news here in these verses, friends, is that we can be at home in our faith even when we are doubting, raging, weeping, despairing. In our cloud of witnesses, we are united with countless siblings who have known the feeling of forsakenness. Jesus is one of them. And he invites us, as a part of following him, to unite ourselves with those who still feel forsaken today.

As we near the end of our time together this afternoon, I invite you to listen to these excerpts from Psalm 22. Listen for the cries of Jesus, listen for your own cries, and listen for the cries of those wounded souls with whom God might want to unite you more closely. “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 I find no rest. ... In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame. But I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people. All who see me mock at me. ... I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my chest. ... You lay me in the dust of death.”

I myself believe that God does not actually forsake anyone, ever. I believe that God is Love, as we read in the letter of First John, and I believe that love binds everything together in perfect unity, as we read in the letter to the Colossians, and I believe that when all is said and done, the God who is Love will unite all things in heaven and on earth in God’s self, as we read in the letter to the Ephesians. But I also know that sometimes, I still feel forsaken, and so do many of you, and so do many people out there, and so did Jesus.

We know—we trust—that the feeling of forsakenness is not the end of the story. But it is part of the story. And on this Friday, it is our story. Amen.