

**Victimized and Forsaken:
"My God, My God, Why Have you Forsaken Me?"**

**A Good Friday Homily – March 21, 2008
Ecumenical Service
Dunellen United Methodist Church**

Matthew 27.41-51 (NRSV)

⁴¹In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying,
⁴²He saved others; he cannot save himself. * He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. ⁴³He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, "I am God's Son." ' ⁴⁴The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.
⁴⁵ From noon on, darkness came over the whole land * until three in the afternoon. ⁴⁶ And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' ⁴⁷ When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'This man is calling for Elijah.'
⁴⁸ At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. ⁴⁹ But the others said, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.' * ⁵⁰ Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. *
⁵¹ At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split.

Mark 15.29-39 (NRSV)

²⁹Those who passed by derided* him, shaking their heads and saying, 'Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days,³⁰ save yourself, and come down from the cross!' ³¹In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. ³²Let the Messiah,* the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.' Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

³³ When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land* until three in the afternoon. ³⁴At 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?*' ³⁵When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'Listen, he is calling for Elijah.' ³⁶And 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.' ³⁷Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. ³⁸And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. ³⁹Now 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!'

What would you be doing at three o'clock on a Friday afternoon?

The people who gathered at Golgotha to witness and cheer the crucifixion of the young carpenter's son from Nazareth in Galilee set aside their afternoon of marketing, playing, and eating. These ordinary folks were not executioners with leather straps, chains wrapped around their necks, blood dripping from their mouths. Nothing like that. These were common people, caught up in the mob, encouraged by their finely robed religious leaders, and a handful of centurions in their military gear, watching the spectacle of three, mostly naked men, criminals in their eyes, hanging on three wooden crosses.

At three o'clock on a Friday afternoon, they were all hanging out, when Jesus cries out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?"

Evil does not appear in red clothes, two horns, fangs, a pointed tail, and a trident. Evil usually appears in the ordinary through common elements and common people. The 20th century Episcopalian priest and psychologist Morton Kelsey reflected on Good Friday in observing that those who ran the concentration camps of Nazi Germany, those who fired up the gas ovens, those who used tattooed human skin for lamp shades, those who performed the mass murders, executions, and mass burials were among the most literate, educated, and mild-mannered people in Europe. Before getting all caught up in Hitler's regime, these folks were

persons who lived quietly and peacefully in their homes.¹

So, too, were the Mongolian hordes who followed Genghis Khan. They were not wild beasts; at home they were kind to their wives and children, but under Khan, they ravaged lands, sweeping through Persia and killing hundreds of thousands in a single city.

We hear about suicide bombers in Iraq and insurgents using children as human shields, or according to my cousin who served two deployments in Iraq and will be headed there again later this year, children who are now enlisted to detonate road-side bombs or provide on-the-ground spy surveillance for insurgents.

¹ Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 307.

Often, the ugliness of evil does not appear as grand and glamorous; it is in the ordinary, in the common and everyday.

We would well remember that Holy Week was an unholy week for centuries on the streets of Europe. Because of a 13th century rule, Jews were not allowed to walk the streets of Europe during Holy Week. If they did, they were given oval-shaped badges that marked them out, separating them from Christians. In the ordinary and everyday, evil lurks within all of us and among us.

It is hard for us to confront the evil that lurks within our hearts on a three o'clock Friday afternoon. We would content ourselves with the Lenten discipline of dealing with private sins, little bad habits, perhaps using this holy season as a way to prop up the New Year's Resolution of three months

ago and recommit to a particular diet or undertake a spiritual practice.

Yet, what confronts us on this Friday afternoon in Jesus Christ's cry of isolation and forsaken-ness is a facing of the raw evil that lurks inside all of us human beings – the crowd of ordinary people, and yes, the mob of extraordinary celebrities.

"My God, My God why have you forsaken Me?" combines with the "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do" in declaring solidarity with those are victims and those who are the victimizers, those who are the agitators and actors of evil, and those who are the recipients of such acts.

To say that God's love in Jesus Christ is for the world is to take both the terrorist and the victim, and saying that God's love is for you, because in some

sense, both are in need of God's radical and strong love.

The victimizer is in need of God because he has fallen to his own evil, given to the internal conflicts of self-hate, pride, falling to the pressure of external pressures of religious or political ideologies that serve hate, violence and war. What pressures were on the Roman centurions but the orders of Pilate, who is on orders from Caesar in Rome to maintain order and peace in his land? What pressures must be on Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, internally and externally, to want Jesus deleted from the face of the earth, the traditions that they must maintain at any cost? They are in need of God. Victimizers, agitators and actors of evil and violence need God for they are alone in their dark world, forsaken and left to their devices to carry out their acts of twisted

lies, parking lot gossip, or even suburban indifference and inaction at the plight of injustice, suffering, and hunger in the world. I think in our community, the fact that so many in our suburban neighborhoods are content with life and living in comfort when thousands of children die every minute is a sanitized indifference that is dangerous as the overt evil and violence that seeks to inflict harm. To victimizers, agitators and acts of evil and violence in small and big forms, Jesus said you are not alone. You have not been forsaken. You are not forgotten. You, too, are welcomed in the Father's love.

Jesus shows His solidarity with victims as well, for He Himself was the victim of evil and violence. He met His death at the hands of a religious system that sought to justify and validate people based not on love, but on a check-and-balance scorecard of

morality and ethics, and a political system that loved power more than truth. He is the victim, and for all who have been victims of evil, injustice, deception, undue hardship, violence, racism, sexism, hate speech, domestic abuse, substance abuse, and all other forms of subjugation which seek to negate who you are, created in God's image – Jesus Christ says you, too, are not forsaken. You have not been forgotten. You, too, are loved by God.

The late missionary David Bosch, tells of the piece of paper that was found among the ruins of the Jewish ghetto in Warsaw after the Second World War. The note was written by Jessel Rakover, as he was preparing himself for the pogrom. The note reads in part:

I believe in you, God of Israel, even if you have tried your best to dissuade me to believe in you. I

believe in your laws, even if I cannot approve of the way you manage things. . .I bow my head before your majesty, but I will not kiss the rod with which you hit me. . . I would like to say to you that at this moment, more even than in any previous period of our eternal struggle for survival, we, the tortured, the humiliated, buried alive, burnt alive, insulted, mocked, we, murdered by the million, that we have the right to know: until when are you going to allow it to continue?. . .I say this to you because I believe in you, more than ever before, because I know now, with absolute certainty, that you are my God, because you cannot be the God of those whose deeds are the most horrendous expression of godlessness;. . .I die in peace, but not appeased; persecuted, but not enslaved; embittered, but not cynical; a believer, but not pleading; a man who

*loves God, but does not say amen to everything. I have followed God even when he had rejected me. I have obeyed his command even when he punished me for that. I have loved him, even when he had flung me down, tortured me, and made me an object of humiliation and derision. And these are my last words to you, my angry God: all this will do you no good. You have done everything possible to destroy my faith, yet I am dying precisely as I have lived, saying: "Shma Yishrael, hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, one Lord." Into your hands, O God, I commit my spirit."*²

To victims you are not forgotten nor forsaken. But just as victims can also become victimizers, withholding a necessary word of forgiveness or holding a deep resentment against the offender,

² A Spirituality of the Road by David Bosch (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1960), 33, 34.

thereby themselves become victimizers, Jesus stands in solidarity with both, with all, with you and me --- victims as well as victimizers, haters as well as lovers. We are not forsaken. We are not forgotten. We are forgiven. We have been loved.