

Palm Sunday, March 29, 2015

Thumpy processional; new members join; Palm/Passion pivot; Wesley Foundation mission minute, read Passion w tenebrae (Mk 14-15). Questions God Asks: Why have you abandoned me?  
Jason Byassee Boone UMC

Mark 15:34-35

This is one of the grandest services of the year. Dana Davis is so gifted at making worship spectacular—big and thumpy. Cassie the Haas family donkey has been to church three times now, I think it's time to talk to her about new member classes. Next year let's get a camel and some elephants in here, shall we? And is it too hard to call up some acrobats? We've had people join our church and become part of our life together—which is like new pink fresh skin grafted onto an old wound that gives life to the whole body, our church will be better for your presence friends. Our praise team [choir] is in top form. Now all I have to do is not mess the whole thing up. Thank you all for the gifts you bring today.

And at the center of it all is Jesus, riding into Jerusalem, acclaimed by children, celebrated with shouts of victory. One of the reasons I think March Madness is so popular is there are very few times in our culture when you are allowed to have sheer unadulterated joy. Strangers who are fans of the same team can hug each other and it's only a little weird. Well here in Jesus' Palm Sunday ride into Jerusalem there is sheer unadulterated joy. If Prince could sing "Let's Go Crazy" in a rock song surely we can all go a little crazy in church in the presence of our king riding to his throne.

But then something surprising and strange happens. Did you notice as Jeff read? "Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve." That's weird. The king rides in to glory acclaimed by one and all, he has a look around, and skedaddles back on out to the Motel 6. Weird, right? It gets weirder. This one acclaimed will be accused of claiming to be king—by the very people who acclaimed him. He'll be accused of claiming to be God—by the very religious leaders who ought to see clearest (people in my line of work can be very dangerous indeed). His best friends will leave him. And he'll be nailed to a cross, left to die between two thieves, the only one who will confess faith in him will be a soldier who still has Jesus' blood on his hands from nailing him up there, and some women off in the distance will watch it all silently. What begins so promising with palms ends in total despair with his passion. And the church confesses this is all for us. Why? It's a mystery bigger than words. One friend of mine has written a 300 page book on the atonement out this spring. And if that's not enough for you another has a 600 pager out this fall. As I got ready for a shorter than usual sermon I found words from my most trusted interpreters, they all have them. And they all fall short. We can't plumb the depths of what God does for us here today friends. We will try. I'll finish today with a long reading from Mark, 90 verses long. On Wednesday we'll worship with me and pastors Vern and Laura washing your feet or hands. Thursday we'll reenact the Last Supper with communion. Friday we'll have our pastoral staff preach 3 minutes each on each of the words of Jesus from his cross. We'll have words. But none are as powerful as the word of God itself, which I'm about to read to you. It's two short verses, don't blink or you'll miss them. Let's stand and sing and turn and listen.

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?"

That's the word of God, it belongs to you, the people of God, **thanks be to God.**

A mystery is the kind of thing that the more you wonder about it, the more there is to wonder about. At 3 in the afternoon, Jesus cried out with a loud voice, Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani. Jesus' mother tongue, learned at Mary's breast, was Aramaic, and here the Greek-writing gospels who speak no Aramaic record his

last words in his mother tongue. They have to translate them since their own readers don't know Jesus' language. A few other times in the New Testament we have words in Aramaic. Mark earlier has Jesus say to a dead little girl "talitha cum," and tells us it means "little girl get up." And she does. In Revelation we have the word "maranatha," which means "Come Lord Jesus." That's the prayer of the church till Jesus returns, come quickly. Make all things right. End all things wrong. At the heart of Jesus life and saving work we have this word, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me. It is hard to imagine a more forlorn word from a religious person who has staked everything on God only to have God fall silent in the moment of deepest need.<sup>1</sup> I read somewhere of a mother at Auschwitz photographed as she led her daughter to the gas chamber. They're naked, in line to die, and helpless. And the mother does the only thing of grace she can. She covers her daughter's eyes with her hand. I wonder if she prayed, God, where are you? I know Jesus did.

I wonder when you've felt most abandoned. Think of it for a minute. Some of us have funny stories of such things—Jaylynn was a third child, easily overlooked (there's a reason she's sort of loud), and her mom accidentally left her at Dairy Queen one time. A friendly stranger lifted baby Jaylynn up to the window and waved goodbye with her little arm to her mama, who saw her and ran back in horrified. You can bet Jaylynn doesn't let her mom forget that (comes in handy in needed moments of manipulation). But most stories of parents abandoning by forgetfulness or malice are not funny. Or of spouses, children, friends, colleagues. Here Jesus is abandoned by the crowds, they melt away like snow when it gets hot. Abandoned by his friends who promised to stay with him to death, one even engineered his arrest for money. And at the worst he is abandoned by God. Anybody ever felt abandoned by God? Jesus did too. Think about that for a minute. GK Chesterton said for just a moment here Jesus seems to be an atheist. Why? What's it mean?

For one he is dying. Strangely we're not sure medically how he died. For years it's been said to be crucified means you suffocate. Your body's weight pulls down on your lungs and you have to push up on the nail in the feet, brushing the wounds in the back against the tree for breath, until you're exhausted and cannot anymore.<sup>ii</sup> But that's apparently not so. But it preaches so people like me repeat it. In another gospel we're told when the spear hits Jesus' side<sup>1</sup> "blood and water flowed." Some say that suggests he had a heart attack, for some medical reason. His heart breaks with love for us. Apparently that's not so either but it preaches so people like me repeat it. It's a little surprising it only takes Jesus 3 hours to die. He'd been beaten, perhaps nearly to death, so maybe it's simple blood loss and exposure. Here's the point. It's horrible. You'd have to think hard to come up with a worse way to die. And that's what God undergoes. He experiences the worst death his creatures can devise to torture their fellow creatures. Most of us want to die painlessly, in our sleep. When God chooses a death he chooses the beating, the crown of thorns, the cross, the nails, the public humiliation. Jewish law says this,<sup>2</sup> "Anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse." This isn't just the Romans way of making an example of troublemakers, it's a religious violation, placing him under a curse. And God chooses it. For us. Nothing human beings can experience is beneath God. Any of his creatures who suffers can look over and see another suffering alongside.

And remember furthermore we Christians think Jesus is God. This is God being abandoned by God. There is a rupture in the very heart of God now, a tear between the Father and the Son. And in that torn space all our fear and terror can be soaked up like a sponge. We never have to lie to God. We can always tell the truth. God can take it. He took it from Jesus.

Jesus quotes a psalm with his dying breath. His whole life has been steeped in prayer, and when he's abandoned by God he knows what to pray. Psalm 22 opens with this,<sup>3</sup> "My God, my God, why have you

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<sup>1</sup> John 19:34 on screen plz

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 21:23 up plz

<sup>3</sup> Ps 22:1 on screen plz

forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?" There may be some religions that promise pain free existence. There may be some views of God that say God keeps anything bad from happening. Those are not biblical religions. The bible never flinches from the worst human suffering. Psalm 22 has other details that take on flesh in the crucifixion.<sup>4</sup> "They divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots."<sup>5</sup> And most impressively, "They have pierced my hands and feet." Somehow Jesus' suffering is no surprise to God. It was written centuries before it happened. God suffers for his creation, to make it whole. That's what Jesus' psalm quote is saying. He's not just God abandoned by God. He's God abandoned by God as God always said he would be.

Think of how we pray. God, give me this, Lord, help that not happen. Parking places and basketball victories. Here's how God prays to God on God's cross: God, where are you. You left me. When I needed you. Jesus learned to pray that way at Mary's knee. He memorized the psalms so he'd have one handy in his hour of deepest need. God is not afraid of our doubts. God had them himself. Pray honestly friends. Jesus does.

Finally this. What's all this mean spiritually? This is the moment of salvation for us, when Jesus expresses doubts to the Father. Why? Here's the best guess I have from the wisdom of the church. Jesus takes on all our sin. All our God-abandonment. All our doubt. That's us at our worst moment on the cross—punished, afraid, miserable, forsaken. Jesus takes those things and he gives us in exchange his divine sonship. Glory. Favor. Grace. Salvation. That's a pretty good trade, did you hear it's terms? Should we get a lawyer to write it up for us? Here's what we give God. Our sin and failure and disgrace. And here's what God gives us. God's mercy and help and strength. We crucify God's son. And God gives us Jesus' resurrection.

That's what's coming. Even in these words of darkest despair resurrection light is starting to shine. Can you see it yet? No? That's ok. It'll come whether we see it or want it to or not. The God abandoned on the cross will not be abandoned in the tomb. And neither will we. Amen.

Before reading Mark 14:22-15:41

There is so much in this passion narrative on which I wish I could comment to you. But there would be no end of words. These 90 verses tell everything that needs telling. They're remarkably restrained. Each word bristles with meaning. I encourage you to go home and read it yourself, perhaps each day of this holy week, looking for more of the mysteries of God's saving work for us. We are awash in meaningless words. No one even gets mad when commercials or politicians or even preachers lie to us. We expect it. The ocean of cheap words in the news, on social media, from even people we care about make us calloused, hard. Well, I have some true words for you. Here they are are you ready?

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<sup>i</sup> Morna Hooker's observation in her commentary on Mark.

<sup>ii</sup> Raymond Brown undoes this in his *Death of the Messiah*

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<sup>4</sup> Ps 22:18.

<sup>5</sup> Ps 22:16.