

Sermon Series: Questions God Asks

“Why have you abandoned me?” by Jason Byassee

Mark 15:34-35

Boone UMC

March 29, 2015

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 is 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.¹ 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.ⁱⁱ 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' side¹ "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,² "Anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse." This isn't just the Romans way of making an example of trouble-makers, 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,³ "My God, my God, why have you 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

¹ John 19:34

² Deuteronomy 21:23

³ Ps 22:1

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.⁴ “They divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.”⁵ 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 does 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 its 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.

Mark 14: 22-15:41

²² While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take it; this is my body.” ²³ Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it. ²⁴ “This is my blood of the^[c] covenant, which is poured out for many,” he said to them. ²⁵ “Truly I tell you, I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.” ²⁶ When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

⁴ Ps 22:18.

⁵ Ps 22:16.

²⁷ “You will all fall away,” Jesus told them, “for it is written: “I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.”^[d]²⁸ But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.”²⁹ Peter declared, “Even if all fall away, I will not.”³⁰ “Truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “today—yes, tonight—before the rooster crows twice^[e] you yourself will disown me three times.”³¹ But Peter insisted emphatically, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.” And all the others said the same.³² They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.”³³ He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled.³⁴ “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,” he said to them. “Stay here and keep watch.”³⁵ Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him.³⁶ “Abba,^[f] Father,” he said, “everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.”³⁷ Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Simon,” he said to Peter, “are you asleep? Couldn’t you keep watch for one hour?”³⁸ Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”³⁹ Once more he went away and prayed the same thing.⁴⁰ When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him.⁴¹ Returning the third time, he said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners.”⁴² Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!”⁴³ Just as he was speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, appeared. With him was a crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders.⁴⁴ Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: “The one I kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard.”⁴⁵ Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, “Rabbi!” and kissed him.⁴⁶ The men seized Jesus and arrested him.⁴⁷ Then one of those standing near drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear.⁴⁸ “Am I leading a rebellion,” said Jesus, “that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me?”⁴⁹ Every day I was with you, teaching in the temple courts, and you did not arrest me. But the Scriptures must be fulfilled.”⁵⁰ Then everyone deserted him and fled.⁵¹ A young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following Jesus. When they seized him,⁵² he fled naked, leaving his garment behind.⁵³ They took Jesus to the high priest, and all the chief priests, the elders and the teachers of the law came together.⁵⁴ Peter followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. There he sat with the guards and warmed himself at the fire.⁵⁵ The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death, but they did not find any.⁵⁶ Many testified falsely against him, but their statements did not agree.⁵⁷ Then some stood up and gave this false testimony against him:⁵⁸ “We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple made with human hands and in three days will build another, not made with hands.’”⁵⁹ Yet even then their testimony did not agree.⁶⁰ Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, “Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?”⁶¹ But Jesus

remained silent and gave no answer. Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" ⁶² "I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." ⁶³ The high priest tore his clothes. "Why do we need any more witnesses?" he asked. ⁶⁴ "You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?" They all condemned him as worthy of death. ⁶⁵ Then some began to spit at him; they blindfolded him, struck him with their fists, and said, "Prophecy!" And the guards took him and beat him. ⁶⁶ While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came by. ⁶⁷ When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked closely at him. "You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus," she said. ⁶⁸ But he denied it. "I don't know or understand what you're talking about," he said, and went out into the entryway. ⁶⁹ When the servant girl saw him there, she said again to those standing around, "This fellow is one of them." ⁷⁰ Again he denied it. After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, "Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean." ⁷¹ He began to call down curses, and he swore to them, "I don't know this man you're talking about." ⁷² Immediately the rooster crowed the second time. ⁷³ Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows twice ⁷⁴ you will disown me three times." And he broke down and wept.

¹⁵ Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, made their plans. So they bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate. ² "Are you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate. "You have said so," Jesus replied. ³ The chief priests accused him of many things. ⁴ So again Pilate asked him, "Aren't you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of." ⁵ But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed. ⁶ Now it was the custom at the festival to release a prisoner whom the people requested. ⁷ A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising. ⁸ The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did. ⁹ "Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate, ¹⁰ knowing it was out of self-interest that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. ¹¹ But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead. ¹² "What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked them. ¹³ "Crucify him!" they shouted. ¹⁴ "Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!" ¹⁵ Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified. ¹⁶ The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers. ¹⁷ They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. ¹⁸ And they began to call out to him, "Hail, king of the Jews!" ¹⁹ Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. ²⁰ And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to

crucify him. ²¹ A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross. ²² They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means “the place of the skull”). ²³ Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. ²⁴ And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get. ²⁵ It was nine in the morning when they crucified him. ²⁶ The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS. ²⁷ They crucified two rebels with him, one on his right and one on his left. ^[28] ^[a] ²⁹ Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, “So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, ³⁰ come down from the cross and save yourself!” ³¹ In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. “He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself!” ³² Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.” Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him. ³³ At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ³⁴ And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”). ^[b] ³⁵ When some of those standing near heard this, they said, “Listen, he’s calling Elijah.” ³⁶ Someone ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. “Now leave him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes to take him down,” he said. ³⁷ With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. ³⁸ The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. ³⁹ And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, ^[c] he said, “Surely this man was the Son of God!” ⁴⁰ Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, ^[d] and Salome. ⁴¹ In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there.

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?

ⁱ Morna Hooker’s observation in her commentary on Mark.

ⁱⁱ Raymond Brown undoes this in his *Death of the Messiah*