

**First Presbyterian Church
Marianna, Florida
Lenten Luncheon March 20, 2012
Glory of God in the Words of Jesus from the Cross:
“My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?”**

Hymn page 14

“Count Your Blessings”
(stanzas 1 and 4 and refrains)

Blessings

Prayer:

Leader: Jesus said, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.”

Unison: **As we hear these words of Jesus from the cross, help us, O God, to see how much he was willing to suffer for us.**

Leader: As we hear him pray even in his suffering, “My God, my God,”

Unison: **help us, O God, to remember at all times, the good and the bad, what our personal relationship with you means to us, for we ask these things in your name. Amen.**

Scripture Reading

Mark 15:29-36

Leader: Those who passed by derided Jesus, shaking their heads and saying,

People: **"Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in Three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!"**

Leader: In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying,

People: **"He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe."**

Leader: Those who were crucified with Jesus also taunted him. When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?"

People: **which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"**

Leader: When some of the bystanders heard it, they said,

People: **"Listen, he is calling for Elijah."**

Leader: And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying,

People: **"Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down."**

Lenten Meditation: A Man in the Crowd at the Cross reflects on the Words of Jesus “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

I just cannot believe that I did it. I thought I had outgrown all that peer pressure when I moved out of my teen years. Maybe it was more mob mentality rather than peer pressure. Whatever you might call it, I sure got caught up in it. It is only as I look back on my day now that I am beginning to see what was happening to me and how I failed to take the time to stop and to question what I was doing and what I was saying. Some of you may have had the same experience. It is certainly so easy to get caught up in what is going on around you and in what other people are doing that you fail to stop and to ask whether what you are doing is really right and proper and good.

Of course, I had never intended to be part of the whole thing. Indeed I had no awareness of what was taking place. I guess it was a morbid sense of curiosity that made us stop. We were on our way into Jerusalem on the first day of the Passover festival when we noticed a crowd just outside the city watching three men hung, nailed to Roman crosses. It was a gruesome way to die: hanging by the hands and feet – with the added humiliation of being stripped of clothing – and slowly dying as breathing became increasingly impossible. For all of its horror my friends and I were drawn to take a closer look at the suffering inflicted on these men. I guess this is precisely what the Romans were wanting. They were hoping that seeing this humiliating and horrible event we might decide that we were going to be good, obedient citizens of the Roman Caesar.

I was embarrassed to be watching this horrible scene yet I was unable to turn away. It was clear as I looked and listened that there was something very unusual about the man on the middle cross. All the attention of the crowd seemed to be focused on him. Some were hurling insults at him. Some women were clearly in

tears and upset at what was happening to him. It was very clear that he had been beaten. His bloodied stripes and the crown of thorns pushed down on his head gave witness to the cruelty of his captors. I was so captivated by the situation that I tried to find out more about what was going on and especially about this man on the center cross. When I asked what he had done wrong someone in the crowd said, “Don’t you know. That’s Jesus, the man from Galilee, whom many believed would lead a revolt and expel the Romans. But his ways of trying to deal with the Romans were so strange – telling his followers to show them kindness, and to love them even if they were our enemies. Besides the Romans, he got all of our religious leaders so upset that they thought he was going to lead a revolt against their power in the Sanhedrin. They were so threatened by him that they convinced Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor, that he was a threat to the Emperor in Rome and that he would be doing Caesar a real favor if he just put him to death and got rid of him.”

The crowd around this Jesus was quite restless. Some of the merchants I had seen in the courts of the Temple seemed to be gloating that he was getting his just reward for overturning their tables and throwing them out of the temple courts just a few days earlier. I would like to say that as we watched this scene we began to be filled with compassion and concern for the way in which this Jesus was being treated. Unfortunately, though, it was just the opposite. The anger and the venom of the crowd towards this Jesus seemed to spread like wildfire rapidly reaching to all who were there, including ourselves. My friend, Levi, was the first to join in the act as he cried out, “He got what he had coming to him. He preached about offering salvation. But now this friend of tax-collectors and sinners cannot even save himself.”

My friend, Jacob, looked up at Jesus and started yelling, “Who do you think you are anyway? Some kind of Messiah you’ve turned out to be. Look at you –

naked, bleeding and dying!” Levi picked up the refrain again, “I feel sick just looking at you. Go ahead and die and put us all out of our misery!”

As I listened to these men who were my closest friends shouting out and hurling such insults at him I found my own anger and hatred of him welling up inside me. This man had done nothing to hurt me, but caught up in that crowd it was so easy to be against him and to sound so brave and strong as I tried to show my unity with them as I too began to shout out, “Some Jew you are. Telling us to love our enemies after the way they have treated us. You are crazy and our nation and world will be far better off without the likes of you.”

I don’t know why I said it. He hadn’t done anything to hurt me. In fact, by all accounts he was a good man. But somehow right there in the midst of that angry crowd with the religious leaders mocking him, the soldiers taunting him, and even my own friends insulting him it just seemed like the right thing to do to show that I was “one of the boys”. Whether or not he was good and innocent just did not bother me. It was far more important to me at that moment to show the crowd I hated him as much as anyone of them.

I was shocked when the sky turned dark. It was the middle of day. It was so dark that we just could not see to make our way into the city. It was such a strange experience and somehow in the midst of it the crowd grew quieter. Maybe like me they were beginning to wonder about what they had been doing and what this darkness in the middle of day might say about what was happening there on this hill called Calvary.

The silence of the strange and unusual darkness was only broken when I heard from that center cross the cry, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

I will never forget that cry. It stopped me in my tracks. I had heard that he had talked about the kingdom of God. Was he really crazy and was this was his

final admission that he was in fact disillusioned in suggesting that he was on God's side, proclaiming God's ways and will and that God would truly be with him and support him?

Or was it possible that he was right after all and that it was people like myself at the foot of his cross who were prompting him to feel that this was a God forsaken place because there was certainly no love here, no mercy here and no compassion here, none of those great characteristics of God about which we love to sing in our psalms. Was it the case that God had forsaken this disillusioned man who had spoken about God, or was it the case that I and all those around me who showed such anger and hatred and had spoken in such unloving and uncaring ways towards him were showing that we had forsaken God and God's ways.

As his cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," continues to haunt me I am so sorry that I got caught up in this whole thing, and had allowed that mob mentality to overcome my own capacity for rational thought.

Had God actually forsaken that man on the center cross? Or was this such a God forsaken place because I and so many others had refused to act in Godlike ways even towards a dying man? I hear his cry over and over, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" and the questions keep turning over and over in my mind. Had I allowed the crowd to make me forsake God? Had I yielded to peer pressure and to mob mentality so much that I could not see what was right or wrong, and what God would have me to do in such a situation?

Maybe history will help to answer my questions. In the meantime I hope that each of you will be able to learn from my dilemma. Think before you speak. Is what you are saying and doing just reflecting those around you? Is what you are saying or doing a sign that you have forsaken God and God's ways?

(Reflections based on Final Words from the Cross by Adam Hamilton, Abingdon Press, 2011, pages 65-66)

As we hear those suggested reflections from that man at the cross I would invite you to think about how you would answer his question, “Was the cross a God forsaken place because God had forsaken Jesus, or because human beings had forsaken God and God’s ways? He had suggested that maybe history would answer this question for him. What answer do you see from history to his question?

As you think about your responses to those questions I would invite you to think about your own life and those moments when you have acted like that man in the crowd around the cross and have allowed peer pressure or mob mentality to have the greatest influence upon your words and your actions, rather than stopping to think is this what God would want me to say or to do?

As you think about such moments in your own life I would invite you in the assurance of God’s grace and mercy silently to seek God’s forgiveness. (Time of Silence)

I would invite you now to think of someone you know, a family member, a friend, a co-worker, an acquaintance who is struggling with peer pressure in his or her life. As you think about that person I would invite you to pray for God’s strength and guidance to them in the decisions they are facing. (Time of Silence)

As we continue to move through this time of Lent I would invite you to continue to pray each day of this week for the person about whom you have thought and also to pray for God’s guidance to see how you may be able to help that person to see God’s presence and God’s will in that situation. (Time of silence)

As you think about your own experience and that of the person for whom you are praying I would like to share some thoughts from one of my online devotionals from this morning. Henri Nouwen wrote:

“It is important to keep a still place in the "marketplace." This still place is where God can dwell and speak to us. It also is the place from where we can speak in a healing way to all the people we meet in our busy days. Without that still space we start spinning. We become driven people, running all over the place without much direction. But with that stillness God can be our gentle guide in everything we think, say, or do.” (*Bread for the Journey, March 20*)

May we all be able to find that still place in our own lives that will help us overcome the peer pressure or the mob mentality that can so easily overtake our thoughts, our speech and our actions.

Prayer:

Leader:

Lord Jesus Christ, as we hear that crowd around your cross it is not hard for us to see how it could all happen. Still today we hear people being taunted and bullied. Rage, anger and hatred are so common. Violence, revenge, and the desire to get even swarm all around us. How easy it is to get caught up in all that seems so good and right without stopping to ask whether this is what you would have us to say or to do.

Unison:

Holy Jesus, keep me from the temptation to join the crowd and to humiliate others. Help me to ground myself in your love and learn to live in the light of your truth rather than in the darkness of lies. Help me to know that you are always near, that you will never forsake me, and that when I come to you admitting my need you will always be there for me, for I ask these things in your name and for your sake. Amen.

Hymn page 11

“I Need Thee Every Hour”
(stanzas 1 and 2 and refrains)

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