

Palm/Passion Sunday B (3/25/2018)

Mark 11:1-11

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Psalm 31:9-16

Philippians 2:5-11

Mark 15:1-47

Jesus' words from the cross seem to carry special significance, don't they? I suppose we listen to him in much the same way that we listen intently to any loved one in the waning moments of his life. Some churches observe Good Friday by stringing together all of Jesus' words from the cross into one extended event of proclamation: the Seven Last Words of Christ. But, it's important to acknowledge that the Gospel storytellers remember these words differently. Luke's Jesus speaks graciously from the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do;" "Surely, I say to you today, you will be with me in paradise;" "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." John's Jesus, perfectly composed in the face of death, says: "Woman, behold your son! Behold your mother!" and, "in order to fulfill the scripture, 'I am thirsty,'" and in the end, "It is finished." Mark's Jesus, the one we behold in today's Passion story, cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

And that's it.

No promise of forgiveness, no declaration of victory, no gentle letting go. As appealing as it might be to harmonize the various accounts of Jesus' dying words – the Seven Last Words of Christ – today we are reminded that **there's**

only one word in the Gospel of Mark, and it's a word of abandonment and despair.

Jesus, the riveting preacher, the celebrated healer, the one who comes in the name of the Lord, summons his last breath to shout in anguish that God is absent in his hour of need. It's unsettling to imagine that he feels completely alone in his suffering and death, so we tend to combine Mark's word with the others. We want to temper Jesus' grief-stricken howl with more measured words. But there's only one word in Mark.

The word itself is a direct quote from the first verse of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?" And, this is no liturgical stunt. On the cross, Jesus' desperation is real. On the cross, Jesus suffers all the persecution, humiliation, and violence that human beings are capable of inflicting on each other. And, **in the shadow of Good Friday afternoon, Jesus, who has expressed such intimacy with the one he calls "Abba," *Papa*, endures the terrifying, bewildering silence of God.**¹

Let this be an occasion to be real, dear church. Suffering in this world is real. Persecution, humiliation, and violence are real. Our own anguished cries – cries of grief, loneliness, and rage – are real. And, **there is no contradiction between faith and lament. When injustice persists, when relationships are broken beyond repair, when disappointment exhausts the last of our**

¹ Matt Gunter, One Church Project, Good Friday Tre Ore, 2012.

energy and hope, in short, when we sense that God “has abandoned us to an indifferent or hostile universe,”² Jesus gives us permission to say so:

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

It's worth noting that Psalm 22 is an old song, familiar to Jesus' Jewish contemporaries. And, the lyrics of lament at the beginning of the song eventually build to a crescendo of praise: “You are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them.... All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD... The poor shall eat and be satisfied... May your hearts live forever!”

We don't get to hear these later verses from Jesus' mouth at his execution. And, we would certainly understand if he's incapable of praise in that moment. Nevertheless, there is some comfort in the notion that **Jesus' final word on Friday afternoon is a song: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?”** Songs of praise will have to wait until Sunday morning, yet **Jesus, with God's silence ringing in his ears, still makes his song in the face of death.**

Dear church, in the godforsaken times; in places of violence, abandonment, and despair; can we sing? **Can we acknowledge the suffering of the crucified today before the expanse of the heavens – suffering so often borne in silence – and sing our lament to God?**

² Ibid.