Dave Johnson
Sermon: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46)
Palm Sunday: April 17, 2011

Normally I include humor and levity when I preach, but following the reading of Matthew’s account of Jesus’ passion, which is so powerful and moving, that will not be the case today. This is a rather dark sermon.

I’m preaching on just one aspect of Jesus’ passion and death: his cry of dereliction from the cross—“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” This cry is the only statement of Jesus from the cross recorded by Matthew (Matthew 27:46).

To be forsaken means to be abandoned, deserted, left behind, disowned.

Most of us can recount episodes in our lives when we were forsaken.

Some endure the pain of being forsaken by a parent when a little child. I recently read an article in the New York Times about a married couple in China on a train with their daughter who looked to be about four or five years old. At one of the stations the three of them stepped off the train. The couple asked the little girl to have a seat on the bench for awhile, and then boarded the train again and left their little girl sitting on the bench alone. They never came back for her.

Some endure the heartbreak of being forsaken or dumped by a boyfriend or girlfriend in school. I still remember being on the dance floor at a homecoming dance in high school when I turned around to see my date slow-dancing with someone else that apparently she liked better. I still remember the hurt and embarrassment I felt on the long walk across the dance floor and out of the gym.

Some endure being forsaken by their employer after investing many of the prime years of their lives in a company or firm. This has especially been the case during the turbulent economy of the past few years.

Some are forsaken by their fiancé or spouse. When I was a freshman in college I remember my English professor describing how it felt when she was stood up at the altar on her wedding day, how it felt to be forsaken by her fiancé in front of all her family and friends, how her highly anticipated joyous wedding day became her worst nightmare. Just this past week a friend of our family was notified by her husband of twenty-five years that he is divorcing her, and she and their kids are utterly devastated.
Some parents are forsaken by their grown children and may spend many years if not the rest of their lives with little or no contact with them, each birthday and holiday accompanied by yet another hearty dose of grief.

Most of us have personally experienced the pain of being forsaken. It hurts to the core. The passing of time does not heal it. People who have been forsaken do their best to move forward but often have an emotional limp that never goes away.

And not only can each of us probably recount times in our lives when we were forsaken, we can also recount times when we have done the forsaking, when we have been the one who abandoned, deserted, left behind, disowned someone else.

Most of us in one way or another have been on both sides of the equation.

Being forsaken is not only an experience common to us; it was common to Jesus too, particularly in his darkest hours, the hours of his passion. Jesus was forsaken by everyone, even his disciples. After Jesus’ betrayal and arrest, Matthew tells us, “all the disciples forsook him and fled” (Matthew 26:56, KJV).

After Jesus was arrested he was kept up all night—tried by the high priests, sentenced to death for the false charge of blasphemy, spit on, mocked, and handed over to Roman soldiers. He was questioned by Pilate, and heard hundreds of people yell, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” He was beaten, flogged, forced to carry the instrument of his own death to the site of his own death.

By the time Jesus cries out in dereliction he has been hanging on the cross for hours, enduring unspeakable suffering—naked, beaten, bloodied, extreme fatigue and stress causing the muscles throughout his body to cramp and spasm, exposed to the elements and insects, subject to the insults of religious leaders who would not let up, hearing the sneers of passersby as he slowly suffocated to death.

Although it is mid-afternoon darkness has covered the sky, and in this moment, the darkest moment in the history of the universe, Jesus cries out in a loud voice, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Interestingly enough, this is the only time in synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) that Jesus is recorded as addressing God as “God” and not “Father.” Jesus has even been forsaken by God. He has been abandoned, deserted, left behind, disowned… even by God.

God the Father was fully able to stop, to immediately stop, Jesus’ horrific suffering, yet did not. When Jesus suffered on the cross, God was silent.
The late biblical scholar Raymond Brown describes this:

“Jesus has been abandoned by his disciples and mocked by all who have come to the cross. Darkness has covered the earth; there is nothing that shows God acting on Jesus’ side… His ‘Why?’ is that of someone who has plumbed the depths of the abyss, and feels enveloped by the power of darkness. Jesus is not questioning the existence of God or the power of God to do something about what is happening; he is questioning the silence of the one whom he calls ‘My God’” (*The Death of the Messiah*, p. 1046).

Often when people suffer they ask, “Why God? Why is this happening? Why won’t you help me? Why are you silent?”

I’ve heard it preached before that when we suffer we shouldn’t ask, “Why?” but rather “What?” or “How”—“What is God trying to teach me?” or “How is God growing my faith?” That is not the least bit helpful. It’s a shoddy attempt to try to find something to control and understand as we suffer because suffering robs us of our perceived ability to control or understand. Jesus did not ask or “what” or “how” questions from the cross. Apparently Jesus, quoting Psalm 22, deemed it appropriate to ask, “Why”? And not just in his heart, but in a loud voice for all around to hear.

In her poem, *Cowper’s Grave*, the Victorian poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning poignantly describes this moment:

Deserted! who hath dreamt that when the cross in darkness rested
Upon the Victim's hidden face no love was manifested!
What frantic hands outstretched have e'er the atoning drops averted!
What tears have washed them from the soul, that one should be deserted?

Deserted! God could separate from his own essence rather,
And Adam's sins have swept between the righteous Son and Father;
Yea, once, Immanuel's orphaned cry his universe hath shaken,—
It went up single, echoless, “My God, I am forsaken!”

Here’s the good news. For the times in our lives when we have been forsaken God offers comfort and empathy—God gets it. For the times when we have forsaken others God offers mercy and forgiveness. God offers grace for all of it.

For all of us, for all time God offers us his grace and presence, especially in the midst of suffering. And while there is not always a clear answer to the “Why?” we cry out when we suffer, there is an answer to Jesus’ cry, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”
The reason God forsook Jesus on the cross was because God would not forsake you… or me. The Bible quotes God in both the Old and New Testaments: “I will never leave you or forsake you” (Deuteronomy 31:6 and 8 and Hebrews 13:5).

Even though through our sin we have forsaken God, God has never forsaken us. Even though we may have been forsaken by others, God has never forsaken us. Even though we may have forsaken others, God has never forsaken us.

God loves us too much to ever forsake us, and it was out of his love for us that Jesus, God in Christ, was forsaken in our place. As we prayed in the collect for today, it was out of God’s “tender love for the human race” that he sent “our Savior Jesus Christ… to suffer death upon the cross” (BCP 219)—or as the Bible tells us: “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). That’s the good news of the gospel.

Jesus was forsaken by God in our place because God would not forsake us.

Amen.