

“CROSS WORDS: IV – ‘MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?’”
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Elkton United Methodist Church
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Third Sunday of Lent

Psalm 22 (selected verses)

Matthew 27:33-46

Their names are Kent and Rebecca Frasure. A number of weeks ago they packed their bags and took off for the adventure of a lifetime – a cruise aboard the Diamond Princess to the Far East. They were having a wonderful time – and then disaster struck. Coronavirus appeared on their ship, and Rebecca was one of its victims. She didn't feel really bad, just had a sore throat, but when she was tested, she tested positive, and immediately the ship's crew sprung into action, and before she knew it, she was led off the ship into a hospital in Japan. She and her husband barely had time to say goodbye and she was whisked away.

He was left behind, quarantined in their small cabin for two weeks, all alone, knowing nobody else. She was stuck in a hospital, feeling not too bad, but all alone as well, having no control over her movements or decisions or anything.

Most of all, they were both scared to death, feeling like life had suddenly spun totally out of control. Imagine having no say over your own life, your own movements, having your loved one taken away from you, being all alone on the other side of the world. It would be easy to become depressed very quickly, easy to panic. Feeling forsaken might be an apt way of describing how this young couple was feeling.

There are times in life when that is the only word that really describes how you're feeling – forsaken. Parents stand at the bedside of a critically ill child, and feel forsaken. How can this be happening?

A man stares out the window in disbelief as his wife leaves after telling him there was someone else. They'd been married forever, and now all he feels is forsaken.

A businessperson sits at her desk in shock as her emotions are reeling. Her partner has been cheating and has robbed her of everything. She has nothing left. Nothing but feeling utterly forsaken.

Unless you've lived a charmed life, you have probably experienced the feeling of being forsaken at one time or another. A time when the bottom dropped out, and you felt bereft, utterly alone, and hopeless. Those moments are the toughest times of life.

But no matter when we have experienced that feeling, it is nothing compared to what our Savior was feeling on the cross as he was crucified. Jesus wasn't just feeling devastated, and humiliated, and in incredible pain – no, the source of Jesus' devastation, his forsakenness was that God was gone. He felt like God, his Father, had turned away from him.

The reason it was so devastating, more than we can possibly understand, is because Jesus knew the presence of God more closely than anyone ever had or ever would. He knew that he was God's beloved Son.

Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way: "Twice in Jesus' life he heard a voice from heaven telling him who he was – first at his baptism and later on the mountain, while he prayed. 'This is my Son, the beloved,' the voice said. Not everyone heard it (she continues), but he did, and the love in that voice kept him

going when other people might have dropped. When he had been up all night, when his best friends missed his point and his enemies hounded him like a swam of black flies, the love in that voice was his own food, his own medicine. ‘My Son, the Beloved.’ The sound of it covered him like a cloak. It was his promise, his reassurance that God’s hand was upon him.” (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*, “The Voice of Love,” p. 83.)

And then, it was gone. As Jesus hung in agony on the cross, after everyone had turned on him, or turned away from him, all he could hear was taunts and jeers, and all he longed to hear was the voice of his Father. But it was not there, and with gasping, pain-filled breaths, Jesus uttered this fourth word from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

It had to be the lowest point in his life. He was stripped bare physically and stripped bare emotionally. He had nothing and no one, and he cried out to a God who seemed to have left him.

It was a terrible moment in time when Jesus hit rock bottom, but thanks be to God it didn’t last forever, because we still have yet to hear three final words from

Jesus on the cross – words that tell us that the moment passed, and Jesus again felt God with him, as he would say later, “Into thy hands I commit my spirit,” and “It is finished.”

So why do we think about this temporary low point in Jesus’ life? Because it was far more than a temporary moment, it was a profound event when Jesus bore the worst of the worst for us – separation from God – so that never again would any of us have to know that pain. Again, some words of Barbara Brown Taylor – “All I know is that, because of it, none of us ever has to feel what Jesus felt again.

Because he was all alone, and we have his company. At our most hurt, our most frightened, our most forsaken by God, we have this companion, who has been there and will be there with us. Nothing we think or do in this state will shock him.

Nothing we say can make him turn away. If we say, ‘Where are you, God? I’m all alone here,’ Jesus said it first. If all we can do is cry out, he cried out first.”

(Barbara Brown Taylor, *ibid*)

Because Jesus went there, to the depths of despair and forsakenness, we never have to. He did it for us, so that never would we have to doubt that God is with us – never.

When those moments hit, and we know they will, though we may cry out, we can be assured that Jesus is with us, we are never alone. He knows our pain, he knows our sorrow, our suffering, our frustrations – and he will walk with us through it all, carrying us until we can walk and breathe again, until life gets better.

There is something else I want to lift up about this moment in Jesus' life as well. The words that Jesus cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" were not just his feelings at that moment, they were the first words of a psalm that he had undoubtedly learned in his studies as a child. They are the first words of Psalm 22.

So as soon as those who were there heard him utter those words, their minds immediately went to that scripture. Someone has said that it would be as if we heard him say words like "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." We know how the psalm ends, we know it's filled with reassurances of God's presence.

And so is Psalm 22. The people standing at the foot of the cross knew that, and Jesus knew that. That's why, even though he couldn't feel God at all in that

terrible, terrible moment, somehow he drew on scripture that reminded him that in the end all would be well.

Oh friends, how important it is for us to, like Jesus, have scripture in our hearts on which to draw, words committed to memory that we can call upon when our souls cry out for help and companionship.

Friends, we're living in stressful times right now. Most of us are participating in this worship service by watching it from home. We're surrounded 24/7 with upsetting news. We really don't know what's going on – all we know is that a virus is sweeping over the globe, and we don't know what that will look like for us in the coming days. We're being advised to stay away from others, to look out for ourselves.

And if it's not the coronavirus, it's the stock market that's giving us anxiety – up and down like a rollercoaster. And then there are the political games that are driving us crazy.

These are trying, stressful times, times when we need each other, and yet the best advice we're being given is to stay apart. Of all times, now is the time that we need to lean on the One who is always with us – Jesus the Christ. Though we might feel forsaken by the circumstances in the world right now, we are not alone. Because Jesus plumbed the depths of despair and felt separation from God, we need never have to – he is with us always.

So please, be of good cheer. God is in control, and Jesus walks with us every step of our journey. Though the events of these days do their best to leave us feeling forsaken, may we always remember that we have a companion on the journey who will carry us through this and anything else life throws our way. And that, with God surrounding us and Jesus walking with us, all will yet be well. Thanks be to God!

Amen.